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Reality and Invention

Reflections on Byzantine Historiography

RALPH-JOHANNES LILIE

It is certainly unnecessary to present here yet another discussion about the significant role Byzantine historiography plays in the reconstruction of the history of the Byzantine empire. The loss of all secular archives and public records that might have provided insight into how the Byzantine administration and its officials operated cannot be compensated for by the few surviving monastic archives and the isolated finds of documents salvaged more or less by chance. Nor can the remaining literary and non-literary heritage of the Byzantines adequately compensate for this lack. Therefore, our image of Byzantine history is necessarily strongly influenced by Byzantine historiography.

This fact has often led modern scholars to adopt uncritically information from Byzantine sources, without consideration of the underlying premises upon which Byzantine historians based their assertions and opinions. When consulting, for example, the still very popular *History of the Byzantine State* by Georg Ostrogorsky one can often recognize an amazing correspondence between the author's own conclusions and the testimonies found in the Byzantine historiographical sources he cites. To quote just one example from Ostrogorsky: the two emperors Herakleios and Basil II were the greatest emperors of the entire Byzantine era: "As late as the thirteenth century, a writer could still name Heraclius and Basil II as the greatest Emperors of Byzantium. These names, which are indeed the greatest in all the history of Byzantium, together symbolize the heroic age of Byzantium, which had its beginning with

the one and its conclusion with the other."¹ Aside from Ostrogorsky's strong advocacy, as this comment demonstrates, of the premise that "men make history," the assertion quoted above could very well be true. If one takes into consideration, however, that the portrait of Herakleios essentially derives from the glorifying epic by George of Pisidia and from chronicles or sources composed during Herakleios's own reign, this positive image becomes quite relative, since it is ultimately based on propaganda disseminated by Herakleios himself and his supporters.² Similarly, the portrait of Basil II is in essence fashioned after the descriptions in the *Chronographia* of Michael Psellos, who was by no means interested in providing an objective account, but rather quite deliberately stylized him as the ideal emperor in order to contrast him positively with the emperors of his own time and criticize them. All facts

1 G. Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State*, trans. J. M. Hussey, rev. ed. (New Brunswick, 1969), 315 (= *Geschichte des byzantinischen Staates* [Byzantinisches Handbuch 1.2 = *Handbuch der Altertumswissenschaft* 12], 3rd rev. ed. [Munich, 1963], 261), with reference to the author Michael Choniates, who, however, in contrast to his brother Niketas Choniates, is not a historiographer.

2 On Herakleios, see P. Speck, *Das geteilte Dossier: Beobachtungen zu den Nachrichten über die Regierung des Kaisers Herakleios und die seiner Söhne bei Theophanes und Nikephoros*, Poikila Byzantina 9 (Bonn, 1988); W. E. Kaegi, *Heraclius, Emperor of Byzantium* (Cambridge, 2002); G. J. Reining and B. H. Stolte, eds., *The Reign of Heraclius (610–641): Crisis and Confrontation* (Louvain, 2002); see, as well, the survey in R.-J. Lilie, *Byzanz: Das zweite Rom* (Berlin, 2003), 80–97.

and deeds that proved inessential or even detrimental to this purpose Psellos intentionally omitted or re-interpreted with a positive slant. Only recently has a more balanced picture of Basil been drawn, though this has not yet found its way into general histories of Byzantium.³ In a similar fashion, Ostrogorsky regards John II Komnenos as the greatest emperor of the Komnenian dynasty, adopting the opinions of the two Byzantine chroniclers John Kinnamos and Niketas Choniates, who even refers to John II as “the crown of all [emperors] from the family of the Komnenoi.” Ostrogorsky, however, neglects to recognize that both authors depend on earlier sources, probably even sharing the very same source that, in turn, was a deliberate vehicle for Komnenian propaganda.⁴

Ostrogorsky is not an isolated case, but reflects attitudes more or less common to previous scholarship in Byzantine studies, which was rarely concerned with questions of the reliability of Byzantine historiographers, tending instead to uncritically adopt and assume their testimonies and embrace their points of

view. This is certainly attributable, in part, to a general tendency among historians of the past to deem the testimony of sources to be reliable until the contrary was proven. It also had to do with the very specific situation in Byzantine studies, in which a relatively small number of scholars were confronted with a large body of source material. It was considered more important to edit these sources first and postpone the analysis.⁵ Because of this view, in the entire last quarter of the previous century only a few scholars devoted themselves to evaluating and commenting on Byzantine source material—including historiographical sources.⁶

An analysis of the idiosyncrasies of Byzantine historiography has, in fact, only just begun to be pursued with some intensity in the last two decades, whereas discussion of the historiography of antiquity and the Middle Ages has been carried on for much longer and with more substantial results.⁷ In Byzantine studies, on

3 On Basil II, see, for example, C. J. Holmes, *Basil II and the Governance of Empire (976–1025)* (Oxford, 2005); as well as P. Stephenson, *The Legend of Basil the Bulgar-Slayer* (Cambridge, 2003); see also the survey in Lilie, *Byzanz*, 246–56; as most recently PmbZ 2.1: Basileios (#20838); for the background of Basil’s image in the *Chronographia* of Michael Psellos, see A. Kaldellis, *The Argument of Psellos’ Chronographia* (Leiden, 1999); most recently R.-J. Lilie, “Fiktive Realität: Basileios II. und Konstantin VIII. in der ‘Chronographia’ des Michael Psellos,” in *Theatron: Rhetorische Kultur in Spätantike und Mittelalter*, ed. M. Grünbart, Millennium Studien 13 (Berlin-New York, 2007), 211–22.

4 J.-L. van Dieten, *Nicetae Choniatae Historia*, CFHB 11 (Berlin-New York, 1975), 47.82–83: κορωνίς ὡς εἰπεῖν τῶν ὅσων Ῥωμαίων ἐκ τοῦ τῶν Κομνηνῶν γένους ὑπερεκάθισαν; Ostrogorsky, *History*, 376 (= *Geschichte*, 311); regarding the common dependence on a shared source, see most recently R.-J. Lilie, “Niketas Choniates und Ioannes Kinnamos,” in *Realia Byzantina (Festschrift für A. Karpozilos)*, ed. S. Kotzabassi and G. Mavromatis, ByzArch 22 (Berlin-New York, 2009), 89–101; more common still is the conviction that Niketas Choniates consulted John Kinnamos as a source; see most recently A. Simpson, “Niketas Choniates: The Historian,” in *Niketas Choniates: A Historian and Writer*, ed. A. Simpson and S. Efthymiadis (Geneva, 2009), 13–34, 28; on Kinnamos in general, see also A. D. Karpozilos, *Βυζαντινοὶ ἱστορικοὶ καὶ χρονογράφοι*, vol. 3, (10^{ος}–12^{ος} αἰ.) (Athens, 2009), 625–61; M. Dabrowska, “Die Herrschaft des Kaisers Manuel I. Komnenos in den Augen von Johannes Kinnamos,” in *Macht und Spiegel der Macht: Herrschaft in Europa im 12. und 13. Jahrhundert vor dem Hintergrund der Chronistik*, ed. N. Kersken and G. Vercamer, Deutsches Historisches Institut Warschau, Quellen und Studien 27 (Wiesbaden, 2013), 419–31.

5 One statement by J. Karayannopoulos in the 1960s is quite typical, in which he declares that one should concentrate on providing scholarly editions of the sources and that the analysis, which was far less important, should wait; see J. Karayannopoulos, “Hauptfragen der Byzantinistik der letzten Jahre,” *Frühmittelalterliche Studien: Jahrbuch des Instituts für Frühmittelalterforschung der Universität Münster* 1 (Berlin, 1967), 170–85.

6 One exception in German scholarship are the studies by Paul Speck, who concentrated on the chroniclers of the eighth and early ninth centuries, Theophanes and Nikephoros, in particular. He encountered some opposition, however, and often overtaxed readers with his overinterpretations.

7 I will confine myself to a few German studies treating the topic with the usual German thoroughness. See, for example: F. J. Schmale, *Funktion und Formen mittelalterlicher Geschichtsschreibung: Eine Einführung* (Darmstadt, 1985); G. Melville, “Kompilation, Fiktion und Diskurs: Aspekte zur heuristischen Methode der mittelalterlichen Geschichtsschreiber,” in *Historische Methode*, ed. C. Meier and J. Rüsen (Munich, 1988), 133–53; see also J. Fried, *Schleier der Erinnerung: Grundzüge einer historischen Memorie* (Munich, 2004). Fried takes a different approach than is discussed here, but likewise questions the traditional interpretation of historiographical texts. See, as well, the volume *Von Fakten und Fiktionen: Mittelalterliche Geschichtsdarstellungen und ihre kritische Aufarbeitung*, ed. Johannes Laudage (Cologne, 2003), which includes the especially important contribution of H.-W. Goetz, “Konstruktion der Vergangenheit: Geschichtsbewusstsein und ‘Fiktionalität’ in der hochmittelalterlichen Chronistik, dargestellt am Beispiel der *Annales Palidenses*,” 225–57. There are too many studies on classical historiography to list here. One more recent survey is provided in G. Marasco, ed., *Greek and Roman Historiography in Late Antiquity: Fourth to Sixth Century A.D.* (Leiden-Boston, 2003); some helpful fundamental observations may be found in the somewhat older volume *Lies and Fiction in the Ancient World*, ed. C. Gill and T. P. Wiseman

the other hand, fundamental issues still require clarification, unless one rejects source-critical approaches altogether, as did W. T. Treadgold in 1998:

My main disagreements stem from a very modern attitude that Professor Ljubarskij accepts but I cannot, that “there is no clear distinction between history and fiction.” This may seem a permissible postulate when we approach history as literature, which Byzantine histories are and their authors intended them to be. The problem is that most Byzantine historians also meant their works to be scholarship, and if we disregard this intention we shall misunderstand both them and their histories. Besides writing literary compositions, they were generally trying to give a faithful picture of past events. They were not generally trying to be impartial; the truth at which they aimed was most often praising the good and blaming the bad, without distracting their readers with too many nuances. They also sometimes tried to please, or at least to avoid offending, emperors and other powerful people. But few Byzantine historians would have written something they believed false simply in order to produce an artful literary composition, as authors of fiction routinely do.⁸

One might argue differently from Treadgold in numerous ways, but the decisive question is whether Byzantine historiographers even considered the categories “false” and “true” in the same sense as contemporary historians. This issue will be examined here.

Byzantine historiography has increasingly become the focus of scholarship in the last few years. Russian- and English-speaking scholars have been especially

active, while the Germans have been more hesitant.⁹ J. Ljubarskij, in particular, has devoted a number of essays to historiographical issues. Studies by A. P. Kazhdan, Paul Magdalino, and two volumes of conference papers must also be mentioned: *L’écriture de la mémoire* (Cyprus 2004, published 2006) and *History as Literature in Byzantium* (Birmingham 2007, published 2010). Finally, Leonora Neville touches on the topic in her study on Nikephoros Bryennios published in 2012.¹⁰

In general, these studies discuss—on a highly theoretical level—the content and development of historiography in Byzantium. Most likely, this will in the long run lead to a reassessment that will then find a place in general historical accounts. The governing focus is on attempting to determine the literary principles (of style and rhetoric) employed in Byzantine historiography and to analyze them from a primarily philological-literary perspective.¹¹

9 Further German exceptions (in addition to P. Speck) are the Theophanes commentary by I. Rochow, *Byzanz im 8. Jahrhundert in der Sicht des Theophanes: Quellenkritisch-historischer Kommentar zu den Jahren 715–813*, BBA 57 (Berlin, 1991); as well as, most recently, L. Hoffmann, “Geschichtsschreibung oder Rhetorik? Zum *logos parakletikos* bei Leon Diakonon,” in Grünbart, *Theatron* (n. 2 above), 105–39; if German commentaries on Byzantine historians are published at all, they are mostly purely philological in nature, e.g., E. Pietsch, *Die Chronographia des Michael Psellos: Kaisergeschichte, Autobiographie und Apologie*, Serta graeca, Beiträge zur Erforschung griechischer Texte 20 (Wiesbaden, 2005), and do not deal with the issues under discussion here.

10 See, in particular: Ljubarskij, “Quellenforschung,” 5–73; *L’écriture de la mémoire: La Littérarité de l’Historiographie*, ed. P. Odorico, P. A. Agapitos, and M. Hinterberger, Actes du III^e colloque international philologique «EPMHNEIA» Nicosie, 8–7–6 mai 2004, Dossiers Byzantins 6 (Paris, 2006); Macrides, *History as Literature*; L. Neville, *Heroes and Romans in Twelfth-Century Byzantium: The Material for History of Nikephoros Bryennios* (Cambridge, 2012); in the essay collections, one can find discussions of large portions of earlier literature on the topic; in a very general context, see, as well, P. Magdalino, “A History of Byzantine Literature for Historians,” in *Pour une “nouvelle” histoire de la littérature byzantine*, ed. P. Odorico and P. A. Agapitos (Paris, 2002) 167–84; for studies on individual Byzantine authors, see the respective sections of this article below. A comprehensive list of all studies cannot be provided here. We refer the reader to the well-known general surveys by H. Hunger, A. P. Kazhdan, A. Karpozilos, W. T. Treadgold, or J. Haldon, summarizing previous studies on this topic.

11 Surprisingly, even these studies only rarely include fundamental discussions; for which, see, for example, the work of Hayden White, even though White’s topics are largely contemporary (commemorating the Holocaust, for example). White’s work questions historiography as such; see *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in*

(Austin, 1993), especially the two essays by J. L. Moles, “Truth and Untruth in Herodotus and Thucydides,” 88–121 and T. P. Wiseman, “Lying Historians: Seven Types of Mendacity,” 122–46. I am greatly indebted to Margaret Mullett for drawing my attention to these two essays, and also for all her constructive criticism.

8 W. T. Treadgold, commenting on J. N. Ljubarskij, in Ljubarskij, “Quellenforschung and/or Literary Criticism: Narrative Structures in Byzantine Historical Writings,” *SOsl* 73 (1998): 57–60, at 58; likewise, W. T. Treadgold, *The Early Byzantine Historians* (Basingstoke, 2010), esp. xii–xv, 368–79; cf. also (in objection) R. Macrides, “Preface,” in *History as Literature in Byzantium*, ed. eadem (Farnham, 2010), ix–xi.

It is not our intention—nor are we able—to compete with these studies. Rather, our approach is different, from the other side, as it were, with history as its point of departure. This approach does not strive to develop a theory of the evolution of Byzantine historiography, but is instead practical, concentrating on content and certain distinctive features encountered time and again when reading Byzantine historiographical texts. From this point of view, the distinction between chronography and historiography that is significant within other contexts is irrelevant in the Byzantine texts and can therefore be deliberately disregarded here. The problems under investigation here pertain to both “subcategories” of Byzantine historical writing; the differences between them are, in our opinion, vastly overestimated.

The fundamental problem is deciding whether these idiosyncrasies belong to a particular author or narrative tradition, or whether these supposed idiosyncrasies perhaps stem from the misinterpretations of the modern reader, who is rarely as well informed about the context of the described events as the Byzantine public was, especially when those accounts are contemporary with that public. In order to clarify this issue, we shall attempt to describe a few specific examples in which Byzantine historiographical texts do not conform to our own understanding of what historiography should be. Ultimately, it comes down to two questions. First, how might we recognize and categorize these idiosyncrasies? The second question results from collecting and categorizing these idiosyncrasies: are the Byzantine historiographical texts merely “inadequate” predecessors of modern historiography, or are we dealing with an independent literary form, manifesting mental attitudes that often appear quite incompatible with our own?

In search of answers one is naturally tempted to consult the testimonies of the Byzantine historians themselves, found in a number of prefaces (προοίμια). There one often reads that knowledge of the past is both essential and instructive for the present, that the historiographer must without exception adhere to the

truth, describe objectively both good deeds and bad, and so forth. In more sweeping terms—rarely are they named—an author will refer to predecessors whom he has studied. For more recent history, there is often a general reference to eyewitnesses as sources. As a rule, this enumeration concludes with the admission that the author does not have the capabilities necessary for successfully completing such an endeavor and requests the reader to pardon any ensuing shortcomings. Theophanes, for example, heavily emphasizes this after relating that his friend George Synkellos had requested him to complete the work he had begun:

As for me, not being unaware of my lack of learning and my limited culture, I declined to do this inasmuch as the undertaking was above my powers. He, however, begged me very much not to shrink from it and leave the work unfinished, and so forced me to take it in hand. Being thus constrained by my obedience to him to undertake a task above my powers, I expended an uncommon amount of labour. For I, too, after seeking out to the best of my ability and examining many books, have written down accurately—as well as I could—this chronicle from Diocletian down to the reign of Michael and his son Theophylaktos, namely the reigns [of the emperors] and the patriarchs and their deeds, together with their dates; I did not set down anything of my own composition, but have made a selection from the ancient historians and prose-writers and have consigned to their proper places the events of every year, arranged without confusion . . . for I believe that one who reads the actions of the ancients derives no small benefit from so doing. May anyone who finds in this my work anything of value give proper thanks to God and, for the sake of the Lord, pray on my behalf of me who am uneducated and sinful.¹²

Nineteenth-Century Europe (Baltimore, 1973); *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore, 1979); *Fiction of Narrative* (Baltimore, 2010). These foundational issues have been discussed in Medieval Studies for quite some time. A discourse on White's theories with respect to Byzantine history unfortunately exceeds the scope of this paper.

12 C. de Boor, *Theophanis chronographia* (Leipzig, 1883), 4:2–19; *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor: Byzantine and Near Eastern History AD 284–813*, trans. and comm. C. Mango and R. Scott with the assistance of G. Greatrex (Oxford, 1997), 1–2; on this preface, see also R. Scott, “‘The Events of Every Year, Arranged without Confusion’: Justinian and Others in the Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor,” in *L'écriture de la mémoire*, 49–65.

Anna Komnene also follows in this vein, but is, however, sufficiently self-confident to dispense with the usual reference to her own shortcomings:

Whenever one assumes the role of historian, friendship and enmities have to be forgotten; often one has to bestow on adversaries the highest commendation (where their deeds merit it); often, too, one's nearest relatives, if their pursuits are in error and suggest the desirability of reproach, have to be censured. The historian, therefore, must shirk neither remonstrance with his friends, nor praise of his enemies. For my part, I hope to satisfy both parties, both those who are offended by us and those who accept us, by appealing to the evidence of the actual events and of eye-witnesses. The fathers and grandfathers of some men living today saw these things.¹³

On a later occasion she declares furthermore that she has used, in addition to her own records, testimonies from old eyewitnesses:

The documents that came into my possession were written in simple language without embellishment; they adhered closely to the truth, were distinguished by no elegance whatever, and were composed in a negligent way with no attempt at style. The accounts given by the old veterans were, in language and thought, similar to those commentaries and I based the truth of my history on them by examining their narratives and comparing them with my own writings, and again with the stories I had often heard myself, from my father in particular and from my uncles both on my father's and on my mother's side. From all these materials the whole fabric of my history—my true history—has been woven.¹⁴

13 D. R. Reinsch and A. Kambylis, *Annae Comnenae Alexias*, 2 vols., CFHB 40 (Berlin and New York, 2001), prol. 2, 337–45. Older edition: B. Leib, *Anne Comnène, Alexiade*, 4 vols. (Paris, 1937–76); *The Alexiad of Anna Comnena*, trans. R. E. A. Sewter (Harmondsworth, 1969), 18.

14 Anna Komnene, *Alexiad* 14.7.64–81; trans. Sewter, 461.

Anna Komnene, however, by no means quotes these eyewitness accounts verbatim, but heavily revises them from a literary perspective, thereby following a tradition formed in antiquity that practically demanded such revision. Ultimately, this lent such a thoroughly literary design to the *Alexiad* that the aforementioned eyewitnesses would probably never have recognized themselves in the text. In other words, even a reference to concrete eyewitnesses like this must be regarded as a literary topos. Whether or not Anna ever consulted such accounts is therefore uncertain.¹⁵

Likewise, Niketas Choniates states:

In recording ancient events and customs, the narratives elucidate human nature and expose men of noble sentiments, those who nourish a natural love for the good, to varied experiences. In abasing evil and exalting the noble deed, they introduce us, for the most part, to the temperate and the intemperate who incline to one or the other of these two scales . . . Whether the actions of a man during his lifetime were holy and righteous or lawless and contemptible, and whether he lived a happy life or gave up the ghost in evildoing, are proclaimed loudly by history.¹⁶

One could quote at random from almost any other preface in which this basic theme is used and varied again and again, which might lead one to conclude that the self-perception of the Byzantines was more or less consistent with the assessment of modern historians. On the other hand, however, the prefaces themselves are shaped by tradition, since they are in general modeled after classical authors, especially Thukydides, who claims to strive for the greatest possible objectivity. It is well known that he never achieved this; likewise,

15 One can therefore concur completely with M. Mullett, who states: "Anna's identification of truth with *plasma* means that in her terms her history is more true once she has combined the 'bare truth' of her informants with her classical understanding and rhetorical *diegesis*"; see M. Mullett, "Novelisation in Byzantium: Narrative After the Revival of Fiction," in *Byzantine Narrative: Papers in Honour of Roger Scott*, ed. J. Burke et al. (Melbourne, 2006), 1–28, with citation on 28 (= M. Mullett, *Letters, Literacy and Literature in Byzantium*, Variorum Collected Studies 889 [Aldershot-Burlington, 2007], no. XI). On the corresponding classical tradition see, for example, Gill and Wiseman, *Lies and Fiction* (n. 7 above), passim, esp. 132–46.

16 Niketas Choniates, *History* 1; *O City of Byzantium: Annals of Nicetas Choniates*, trans. H. Magoulias (Detroit, 1984), 3.

Tacitus's famous *sine ira et studio* is veritably contradicted in his works.¹⁷

Stated another way, the preface of a Byzantine historiographer, characterized as it is by *topoi*, does not necessarily have anything to do with the content or style of the subsequent work, as the example of Niketas Choniates illustrates, who raves in his preface about the great effort he put into cultivating a simple and clear writing style. A later reader was so incensed by the sharp contrast between this stated intention and the succeeding work that he even recorded his protest for posterity in a marginal note: "I do not know what you mean here, Choniates, when you say that when writing clarity is wisdom, and then you write complicatedly and ornately."¹⁸

Except for their prefaces, most Byzantine historiographers before the eleventh century rarely manifest themselves in their works. After this, it becomes increasingly common for authors to speak of themselves, but even then it does not become the rule, and the remarks made seldom reveal anything about the individual author's own views on writing history. Here one must also keep in mind that many of these authors, especially of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, held high official positions and were thus themselves active protagonists in the politics of their time. This personal involvement can lead to a sense of obligation to explain their own actions and perhaps, at times, even credit themselves with greater importance than they actually had, as the case of Michael Psellos, perhaps the most famous "politician-author," illustrates.¹⁹

17 On Thukydides' preface, see, for example, Moles, "Truth and Untruth" (n. 7 above), *passim*, esp. 98–121, who analyzes the "literary" portions of the preface, with particular focus on the interdependence of "literature" and "history."

18 Marginal note in Niketas Choniates (van Dieten, *Nicetae Choniatae Historia* [n. 4 above], XXXII); on this, see most recently A. Kaldellis, "Paradox, Reversal and the Meaning of History," in Simpson and Efthymiades, *Niketas Choniates* (n. 4 above), 75–99, at 76–77.

19 On the author's personality and how he appears in his works, see the definitive study of Macrides, "The Historian in the History," in *ΦΙΛΕΛΛΗΝ: Studies in Honour of Robert Browning*, ed. C. N. Constantinides, N. M. Panagiotakes, E. Jeffreys, and A. D. Angelou, Istituto Ellenico di Studi Bizantini e Postbizantini di Venezia, Bibliotheca 17 (Venice, 1996), 205–24. In addition to a general discussion, Macrides focuses primarily on Michael Psellos, Anna Komnene, and Georgios Akropolites, all three of whom—the former two, in particular—can hardly be regarded

Aside from these considerations, however, one fundamental question remains. Does a statement a Byzantine author makes in his preface, following a tradition established in antiquity, declaring that he will recount the events truthfully and impartially just as they occurred, have the same meaning it has for modern readers? Did such terms as "true/untrue" or "real/unreal" have the same value for him, or did he possibly have an entirely different understanding? This latter question will need to be examined as well.²⁰

In what follows we shall attempt to sketch the various areas in which Byzantine historiographical texts display idiosyncrasies or where they may lead to misunderstandings. We shall present a number of concrete examples, which will allow us to analyze the specific problems encountered. The basic areas to be examined are: 1. deliberate tendentious modification; 2. characterization by deeds; 3. sensationalism and overdramatization; 4. *bon mots* and sayings; 5. epic

as "normal" examples of Byzantine historiographers; on Anna Komnene, see also Mullett, "Novelisation," 8–14, as well as the volume of T. Gouma-Peterson, *Anna Komnene and Her Times* (New York-London, 2000); on Psellos, see now S. Papaioannou, *Michael Psellos, Rhetoric and Authorship in Byzantium* (Cambridge, 2013); on autobiographical elements in Byzantine historiographical texts in general, see M. Hinterberger, *Autobiographische Traditionen in Byzanz* (Vienna, 1999), esp. 295–343. I would like to express my gratitude toward an anonymous peer-review reader of the *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* for drawing my attention to the last two studies.

20 This statement is, of course, quite sweeping and general. A thorough analysis of the prefaces cannot be provided here. But see, among others, H. Lieberich, *Studien zu den Prooimia in der griechischen und byzantinischen Geschichtsschreibung*, vol. 2: *Die byzantinischen Geschichtsschreiber und Chronisten* (Munich, 1900); R. Maisano, "Il problema della forma letteraria nei proemi storiografici bizantini," *BZ* 78 (1985): 329–43; H.-A. Théologitis, "La Forza del Destino: Lorsque l'histoire devient littérature," in *L'écriture de la mémoire* (n. 10 above), 181–219, esp. 187–93; most recently S. Papaioannou, "The Aesthetics of History: From Theophanes to Eustathios," in Macrides, *History as Literature*, 3–21; in particular, on the frequently mentioned preface of Niketas Choniates, see most recently Simpson, *Niketas Choniates* (n. 4 above), 26–27 (with older literature), who notes that Niketas exhibits a strong reliance on Diodorus in his preface; eadem, "From the Workshop of Niketas Choniates: The Authority of Tradition and Literary Mimesis," in *Authority in Byzantium*, ed. P. Armstrong, Centre for Hellenic Studies, King's College London, Publications 14 (Farnham, 2013), 259–68, at 264–65; see also Kaldellis, "Paradox," 56–78. On the true/untrue polarity, see as well the fundamental considerations of Wiseman, *Lying Historians* (n. 7 above), *passim*.

elements; 6. problems of terminology; 7. the supernatural; 8. “timeless” episodes; and 9. anonymous quotations.

With this approach, certain overlaps in the problems under discussion are not only unavoidable, but will, in fact, be the rule. If the different categories are nevertheless treated separately, this is to better accentuate the individual themes. These questions will be discussed in greater detail in the individual sections.

The decisive question, trivial as it may appear at first, is and remains: What is the author’s intention? Does he “only” wish to inform about and explain what has transpired, without ulterior motives? Or is he pursuing certain objectives, such as to demonstrate the workings of God or the devil in the world, or to please or criticize the current rulers? If he refers to himself, is it to defend or to draw attention to his own person? Or does he primarily desire to create an “appealing” and ambitious literary work that will at once entertain his audience and also demonstrate his own intellectual abilities? Upon which sources is he himself dependent? Does he quote them verbatim, or does he manipulate them? If yes to the latter, to what purpose? Naturally, the very same questions must also be asked of these sources.

The work of any author is always a reflection of his own personality, as well as his aspirations and notions. We can certainly presume that he did not write for himself alone, but rather for a particular audience whose opinion he valued. This, in turn, means that he needed, at least in part, to make some allowances for the expectations of his audience. What type of audience did he have, what were its expectations, and to what extent did the author comply? How do literary conventions play a role, and could an author, should occasion arise, disregard them? In the case of modifications to quoted source materials, was the author even aware of these? And finally: to what degree do our own expectations of how a historian should write influence our perception?²¹ The principal question of the entire discussion concerns the extent to which the—presupposed—effort to deliver a correct account of events collides with a Byzantine author’s literary

aspirations, and perhaps also with the development of the genre.²²

It is utterly clear, of course, that it is impossible to provide an exhaustive answer in a single study, rather that we must instead content ourselves with a few cases in point that best illustrate the argument. We have therefore chosen cases that are particularly self-explanatory and require no further explication. Anyone can easily extend the list.

It goes without saying that the selections as well as the categorizations are highly subjective.²³ Other scholars are likely to emphasize other themes or perhaps come to different conclusions. It is our intention here to open up pathways for a discussion of a variety of phenomena that, in our opinion, have previously been neglected by scholarship, but considered together might contribute to a new approach for the analysis of Byzantine historiography.

1. Deliberate Tendentious Modification

The deliberate shaping of their accounts in accord with specific intentions and convictions is not confined to Byzantine or even classical or medieval historiographers, but continues into the practice of contemporary historians. In what follows we shall attempt to demonstrate that such modifications are by no means limited to concrete characterizations and great events of state, but are even manifest in small bits of information that may appear entirely innocent at first glance. We shall also examine (with a few examples) the methods Byzantine authors employed when dealing with people of whom they disapproved.²⁴

22 See the methodological considerations of Théologitis, “*La Forza del Destino*,” especially at the beginning and the end of his article.

23 We will discuss examples from about twenty different authors, who wrote between the sixth (Procopius) and fifteenth (Doukas) centuries. Our focus will be on the period between the seventh and twelfth centuries. Most of these authors were analyzed in the course of my research for the project *Prosopographie der mittelbyzantinischen Zeit* (PmbZ). I would like to take this opportunity to thank my former colleagues for many fruitful discussions. The topic is so broad, not only from the aspect of the timeframe but also the number of authors, that it is impossible to provide a comprehensive bibliography for every author and each category discussed here. For further literature, I therefore request that the reader consult the cited works.

24 The examples given in any individual section of this article could often just as well have been used to illustrate another section, in this case, for example, no. 2 (Characterization by Deeds).

21 On this question within a broader context, see M. Mullett, “Dancing With Deconstructionists in the Gardens of the Muses: New Literary History vs.?” *BMGS* 14 (1990): 258–75, esp. 268–72 (= *Letters, Literacy and Literature* [n. 15 above], no. XVI).

Examples

An item that appears entirely believable at first glance is contained in the so-called *Logothete Chronicle* concerning Emperor Basil I (867–886) on the occasion of the Arab conquest of Syracuse in Sicily in the year 878: the author ultimately ascribes the fall of the city to the fact that the relief fleet did not arrive in time to avert its fall. This delay, however, was the fault of the emperor, who had employed the soldiers in the palace district for the construction of the Nea church: ἀσχολουμένων δὲ τῶν πλοίων ἐν τοῖς κτίσμασιν καὶ ἐκχοῖσμοῖς τῆς Νέας ἐκκλησίας ἐγένετο βραδύτης τοῦ στόλου καὶ τοῦ λαοῦ, καὶ παρεδόθη ἡ αὐτὴ Συράκουσα πρὸ ὀλίγου πρὶν ἢ φθάσαι τὸν στόλον.²⁵ At first glance, this claim appears quite credible. The Nea was the first new church to be built within the palace district for quite some time and was evidently for Basil I an extremely prestigious project. In this respect, one might be somewhat amazed that the emperor, who was otherwise known for his pragmatism, would accept the fall of an important provincial city so as to complete sooner the construction of a church, but worse things were known to have occurred in Byzantine history. The whole story becomes rather suspicious, however, when the *Logothete Chronicle* repeats the exact same accusation twenty-four years later, when condemning Emperor Leo VI (886–912) for causing the fall of Taormina in Sicily, because he retained the crews of the fleet in Constantinople to employ them for the construction of a church in memory of his deceased first wife, Theodora. Even the wording is similar: ἀσχολουμένου δὲ τοῦ στόλου εἰς τὰ κτίσματα τῶν τοιούτων ἐκκλησιῶν παρελήφθη ἐν Σικελίᾳ τὸ Ταυρομένιν ὑπὸ τῶν Ἀφρων.²⁶

25 S. Wahlgren, *Symeonis magistri et logothetae chronicon*, CFHB 44.1 (Berlin-New York, 2006), 132.77–80; I. Ševčenko, *Chronographiae quae Theophanis continuati nomine fertur liber quo Vita Basilii Imperatoris amplectitur*, CFHB 42 (Berlin and New York, 2011) (= Theoph. cont. 5 [Bonn, 1838]) 69, 309.23–310.7; 238.10–240.28, on the other hand, explains that the fleet was held up by adverse winds and therefore only made it as far as Monembasia when the news of the fall of Syracuse reached them; on Basil I's reign, see PmbZ 2.1: Basileios I. (#20837); in general, on the *Vita Basilii* (= Theoph. cont. 5), which was either written by Basil's grandson Constantine VII himself or at least commissioned by him, see also A. D. Karpozilos, *Βυζαντινοὶ ἱστορικοὶ καὶ χρονογράφοι*, vol. 2, 8^{ος}–10^{ος} αἰ. (Athens, 2002), 331–43, as well as, in particular, Ševčenko in his new edition of the *Vita Basilii* (= Theoph. cont. 5).

26 Symeon log. 133.238–41; almost identical wording is found in Theoph. cont.: I. Bekker, *Theophanes Continuatus, Ioannes*

Considering the great similarity between the two episodes, it can very well be assumed that at least one of them was composed with knowledge of the other. One possible explanation valid for both cases would be that the author intended to depict the emperor as the party responsible for the catastrophe in Sicily. If we were to accept both reports as true, however, that would mean that within a mere twenty-five years the exact same situation had arisen with the exact same conduct, the same outcome, and with a practically identical description. What is interesting in this context, however, is that the chronicle of Theophanes Continuatus, usually quite favorably inclined toward the Macedonian dynasty, relates the story of the delay of the fleet due to Leo VI's church project. Since this chronicle is usually dated earlier than the *Logothete Chronicle*, this could mean that the whole episode was first written in the context of the fall of Taormina in 902, and later transposed to the fall of Syracuse in 878 in the *Logothete Chronicle*. One issue remains unsettled: whether the explanation for the fall of Syracuse or Taormina is even cogent, or if it already constitutes a defamation. An argument in favor of the latter would be that the construction of the Nea was a project of great prestige for Basil I, since it was the largest new church built in Constantinople in a long time. Generally, the construction of churches, the foundation and patronage of monasteries, and other pious works were regarded as an emperor's duty, and usually won him great acclaim. By

Cameniatā, Symeon Magister, Georgius Monachus (Bonn, 1838), 1–481, 6:18, 365.3–6. The reference by Theoph. cont. is a bit surprising, since this work is generally quite favorably inclined toward the Macedonian dynasty; Leo VI is not mentioned by name, however. In what immediately ensues, the *Logothete Chronicle* blames *drungarios ton ploimon* Eustathios and the other commanders, and even portrays them as traitors: τῇ ἀμελείᾳ, μᾶλλον δὲ προδοσίᾳ Εὐσταθίου, δρουγγαρίου τῶν πλοίων. . . . This passage is missing in Theoph. cont.; on Leo VI, see PmbZ 2.4: Leon VI. (#24311); on both sources, see also A. Kazhdan, *A History of Byzantine Literature (850–1050)*, ed. C. Angelidi, The National Hellenic Research Foundation, Institute for Byzantine Research, Research series 4, vol. 2 (Athens, 2006), 162–70 (*Logothete Chronicle*); 137–52 (Theoph. cont.); PmbZ 1, Prolegomena: 20; PmbZ 2, Prolegomena: 3–5 (*Logothete Chronicle*); PmbZ 1, Prolegomena: 16–17; PmbZ 2, Prolegomena: 1–3, 10 (Theoph. cont.); Karpozilos, *Historikoi* 2:391–473 (*Logothete Chronicle*); 345–66 (Theoph. cont.); in particular, on the first three books of Theoph. cont., see J. Signes Codoñer, *El periodo del segundo iconoclasmo en Theophanes Continuatus: Análisis y comentario de los tres primeros libros de la crónica*, Classical and Byzantine Monographs 33 (Amsterdam, 1995).

associating the construction of the Nea with the loss of Syracuse to the Arabs, the gain in prestige through its construction was counteracted, since it had enabled the simultaneous loss of a Christian city to the infidels and was thereby more than counterbalanced. In the case of Leo VI, one must recall that this emperor had been harshly criticized for his separation from his first wife Theodora, who was later revered as a saint for a time, and for his subsequent three marriages. Thus, in this case, even the building of a new church, which could be interpreted as a sign of repentance on Leo's part, became a sign of the iniquity of Leo, who had, as it were, sacrificed Taormina in penance for his personal wrongdoings.

Of course, we may also observe the opposite case: the chronicler Theophanes describes Emperor Constantine V's wars against the Bulgars, including the emperor's great victory in the year 763. This victory is also mentioned in the parallel account by Nikephoros. In his *Antirrhetikos*, however, written some thirty years later, this victory has suddenly become transformed into a disastrous defeat, in which almost the entire Byzantine force was left behind on the battlefield. Nikephoros's hostile attitude toward the iconoclast Constantine V is not the only reason for this falsified account. More significant were the current circumstances under which Nikephoros launched his invectives against the Iconoclasts: the Byzantine Empire had been successful under Constantine V's rule and had forced the Bulgars to the brink of subjugation. This changed after the emperor's death. Awkwardly enough, these failures increased after the Byzantines condemned Iconoclasm as heretical at the seventh Ecumenical Council of Nicaea in 787 and returned to Orthodoxy. The empire had been in a particularly precarious situation just at that time when Nikephoros was composing his *Antirrhetikos*: the Byzantine Empire had suffered numerous heavy defeats, Emperor Nikephoros I himself had fallen in combat—the first emperor to meet that fate since Valens in 378. In this situation, the voices of those who blamed these failures on the emperor's renunciation of Iconoclasm grew increasingly loud. This would appear justifiable, since the emperor who had celebrated the greatest victories over the Bulgars was the very same Constantine V who had been the leading advocate of Iconoclasm in the second half of the eighth century. Nikephoros reacted to this problem simply by denying

the emperor's victories, well known to him as his previous work demonstrates, and transforming them into defeats. It goes without saying that the opposite could also occur, when historiographers fashioned their accounts according to their own intentions and interests, instead of according to fact.²⁷

The fundamental difficulty in assessing these narratives is that very often there are no other sources available for comparison. Especially for the middle Byzantine era, many historical works ultimately derive from only a very few common sources, whose tendencies are nearly impossible to establish. The cases in which an entire reversal of actual events is encountered are generally rare; more common are a toning down or elaboration, according to bias. This is also—and in particular—true for the depiction of Constantine V's wars against the Bulgars in the eighth century by iconodule chroniclers of later times.²⁸

When Byzantine historians intend to praise or defame principal figures—and the latter is more frequent—they usually present a lengthy discussion of their motives, which leads to moralizations on their respective characters. This occurs by means of appropriate attributes as well as descriptions of smaller episodes that throw a proper light on the protagonists. Let us take a closer look at a few notable examples: the Byzantine chronicler Theophanes reports for the year 719:

27 Theophanes, *Chronicle* 433.5–10; Rochow, "Kommentar" (n. 9 above), 179; eadem, *Kaiser Konstantin V. (741–775): Materialien zu seinem Leben und Nachleben*, BBS 1 (Frankfurt, 1994), 95–96; C. de Boor, *Τοῦ ἐν ἀγίοις πατρὸς ἡμῶν Νικηφόρου πατριάρχου Κωνσταντινουπόλεως ἱστορία σύντομος ἀπὸ τῆς Μαυρικίου βασιλείας*, *Nicephori archiepiscopi Constantinopolitani opuscula historica* (Leipzig, 1880), 1–77, 69.13–18; C. Mango, *Nikephoros Patriarch of Constantinople, Short History: Text, Translation, and Commentary*, CFHB 13, Series Washingtonensis = DOT 10 (Washington, D.C., 1990), 76 p. 148.11–16; *Nicephori Patriarchae Cp. Antirrheticus III adversus Constantinum Copronymum* 72 (PG 100:508A–B); on Constantine V see PmbZ 1.2: Konstantinos V. (#3703); that Theophanes "rearranged" his sources if he deemed it necessary to better clarify his intentions was demonstrated by Scott, "Events," 60–64; see also Kazhdan, *Literature*, 2:205–34 (on Theophanes, in general) and 211–14 (on Nikephoros); PmbZ 1, Prolegomena: 13–15 (Theophanes); 15–16 (Nikephoros); Karpozilos, *Historikoi* 2:117–185 (Theophanes); 2:61–68 (Nikephoros).

28 See Rochow, *Konstantin V.*, 93–102. In this article the terms "chronicle/chronicler" and "historian/historiographer" are used as synonyms, except on those few occasions when the difference between the genres is explicitly discussed.

In this year a son was born to the impious emperor Leo, namely the yet more impious Constantine, the precursor of the Antichrist . . . While the archbishop Germanos was baptizing there the successor to their wicked empire, namely Constantine, a terrible and evil-smelling sign was manifested in his very infancy, for he defecated in the holy font, as affirmed by actual eyewitnesses. Whereupon the most holy patriarch Germanos declared prophetically that that sign denoted the great evil that would befall the Christians and the Church on account of Constantine.²⁹

There is no cause for a discussion here as to whether or not it is physically possible for a small infant to emit “a terrible and evil-smelling sign” while relieving himself, but it is entirely impossible that this incident ever occurred in this manner. Any patriarch who declared in the presence of the reigning emperor, in full public at a solemn religious ceremony, the son and heir to the emperor’s throne a calamity for all Christians and the Church certainly would not have lived another ten minutes after such a display of audacity, at least not in his capacity as patriarch. The whole choice of words manifests the chronicler’s profound loathing for the infant being baptized, the future Constantine V. This antipathy is well known and also predictable, since Theophanes was, as we have mentioned, a fervent advocate of the veneration of icons, whereas Emperor Constantine V was its most vehement adversary, a heretic, whom the chronicler vilifies accordingly. His biased account is, therefore, quite explicable, although entirely implausible because of the great exaggeration. That the patriarch cannot have caused any stir at the baptism is evident from Theophanes’ entry for the following year—this time without any comment—in which he briefly relates that Constantine was crowned emperor by his father: “The customary prayers were recited by the blessed patriarch Germanus.”³⁰

29 Theophanes, *Chronicle* 400.3–17; trans. Scott and Mango, 551; on this passage, see Rochow, “Kommentar,” 99.

30 Theophanes, *Chronicle* 401.9–12: Τούτῳ τῷ ἔτει ἰνδικτιῶνος γ', τῇ ἡμέρᾳ τοῦ πάσχα, ἐστέφθη Κωνσταντῖνος ὑπὸ Λέοντος, τοῦ πατρὸς αὐτοῦ, ἐν τῷ τριβουναλίῳ τῶν ἱθ' ἀκουβίτων, τοῦ μακαρίου Γερμανοῦ τοῦ πατριάρχου ποιήσαντος τὰς πρὸς συνήθειαν εὐχάς; trans. Scott and Mango, 554.

Theophanes relates and interprets the fate of other Iconoclasts in a similar way, for example, the death of Emperor Leo IV in the year 780: “On 8 September of the 4th indiction Constantine’s son Leo died in the following manner. Being inordinately addicted to precious stones, he became enamoured of the crown of the Great Church, which he took and wore on his head. His head developed carbuncles and, seized by a violent fever, he died after a reign of five years less six days.”³¹

This account is definitely false as well, since we can rule out entirely that a Byzantine emperor would have misappropriated one of the votive crowns hanging in the Hagia Sophia. But it corresponds to the generally negative portrait Theophanes tends to render of Leo IV. We may thus readily classify this under the anti-iconoclastic tendency encountered elsewhere in Theophanes’s chronicle: a deliberate attempt to vilify the iconoclastic emperor and to portray his death as divine punishment.

Such falsification is not restricted to the Iconoclastic dispute, but is encountered again and again.³² It is clearly evident in the *Logothete Chronicle*, known for its extremely critical stance on the Macedonian dynasty. After his coronation in 867, Basil I deposed Patriarch Photios and recalled Patriarch Ignatios, who had been overthrown by his predecessor Michael III. This deposition is in all probability attributable to national and international political considerations. The *Logothete Chronicle*, however, states another reason: Photios was deposed because he had called the emperor a robber and a murderer and unworthy to celebrate Mass, when he had wanted to celebrate the liturgy together with him. Basil had thereupon called upon Rome and, together with the Roman bishops, issued a decree banishing Photios and restoring Ignatios to the patriarchal throne.³³ When one recalls, however, that

31 Theophanes, *Chronicle* 453.26–29; trans. Scott and Mango, 625, 107; see Rochow, “Kommentar,” 228; on Leo IV, see PmbZ 1.2: Leo IV. (#4243); in general, on the problem of sources of the iconoclastic era, see most recently L. Brubaker, *Inventing Byzantine Iconoclasm* (London, 2012).

32 On two earlier examples from the early fifth century, see R. Scott, “From Propaganda to History to Literature: The Byzantine Stories of Theodosius’ Apple and Marcian’s Eagles,” in Macrides, *History as Literature*, 115–31.

33 Symeon log. 132.35–40: Φώτιος δὲ ὁ πατριάρχης ἐλθόντος τοῦ βασιλέως ἐν τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ καὶ μέλλοντος αὐτοῦ κοινωνεῖν τοῦτον ληστὴν καὶ φονέα ἔλεγεν καὶ ἀνάξιον τῆς θείας κοινωνίας. On Basil I,

Photios did not fall into immediate disfavor, but was instead appointed tutor to the imperial princes and in 877 resumed the patriarchal throne a second time after Ignatios's death, the claims of the *Logothete Chronicle* are clearly seen as false.

Another example of this type of defamation is found in Michael Psellos's portrayal of Emperor Constantine VIII, from which we have chosen only one passage to discuss in detail. In chapter seven of the section on Constantine VIII, Psellos relates the following on the emperor's physical condition: "Being dominated by his gluttony and sexual passions, he became afflicted with arthritis, and worse still, his feet gave him such trouble that he was unable to walk. That is why, after his accession, no one saw him attempt to walk with any confidence; he used to ride on horseback, in safety." In the chapter immediately following, Psellos describes the emperor's passion for theater and sports events, in which he also actively participated: "The *gymnopia* [recte: *gymnopaidia*], long ago neglected, was also revived in his reign. He reintroduced it into the theatre, not content with the emperor's normal role of spectator, but himself appearing as a combatant, with opponents. It was his wish, moreover, that his rivals should not be vanquished simply because he was the emperor, but he liked them to fight back with skill—his own credit for the victory would thus be greater."³⁴ The descriptions are mutually exclusive. Whether either of them are true can no longer be determined. Considering that Constantine was sixty-five when he came to power, the former is the more probable, but that is insignificant. One can even presume that Psellos quite deliberately

juxtaposed the two episodes antithetically, which was rhetorical practice and especially appropriate to this author's particular penchant for stylization.³⁵

The situation, however, is different: with these two episodes Psellos intends to defame Constantine VIII and portray him as an emperor who neglects the empire and selfishly devotes himself without restraint to satisfying his own personal needs. The accuracy of the episodes described is of no significance to Psellos; only the impact on the reader is important. The entire depiction of Constantine's reign is deliberately designed in contrast with that of his brother and predecessor Basil II, who is portrayed as the ideal emperor. Even this is not intended to convey an unbiased account of events, but Psellos, with his idealization of Basil, is indirectly criticizing the performance of the emperors of his own time, who, in his opinion, were to blame for the fall of the empire. In Psellos's eyes, Constantine VIII was the first of these incompetent successors, and he disparages him as an individual, as well as for his performance as an emperor, with all the rhetorical tools at his disposal.

But here, as well, we cannot limit ourselves to considering just one particular author, but must also consult his sources. One example is Niketas Choniates on the succession of Manuel I Komnenos to John II in 1143. Niketas has John II, who had accidentally been poisoned and was lying on his deathbed, give a lengthy speech recommending his son Manuel as his successor. It is certainly highly improbable that John II would have been able, in his condition, to give a speech of this kind, embellished with literary allusions and rhetorical figures. What is decisive, however, is that Manuel based his claim to succession as emperor on this very speech, and was able to assert himself against his elder brother, Isaac, who would have been the rightful heir according to Byzantine tradition. It is highly probable that this speech was prepared and published by order of Manuel himself. Niketas does not mistrust it, and he even embellishes it, going far beyond Kinnamos, who also cites John II's speech from the same source, but much more briefly.³⁶

see PmbZ 1.1: Basileios I. (#832); PmbZ 2.1: Basileios I. (#20837); on Ignatios, see PmbZ 1.2: Ignatios (#2666); PmbZ 2.2: Ignatios (#22712); on Photios, see PmbZ 1.3: Photios (#6253); PmbZ 2.5: Photios (#26667).

34 *Fourteen Byzantine Rulers: The Chronographia of Michael Psellus*, trans. E. R. A. Sewter, rev. ed. (Harmondsworth, 1982), 57; S. Impellizzeri and U. Criscuolo, *Michele Psello, Imperatori di Bisanzio (Cronografia)*, vol. 1, *Libri I–VI* 75, trans. S. Ronchey (Milan, 1984), 7–8, pp. 64–66; on the comparison and Psellos's attitude toward Constantine VIII, see most recently Lilie, "Fiktive Realität" (n. 3 above), 211–22; on Basil II, see PmbZ 2.1: Basileios II. (#20838); on Constantine VIII, see PmbZ 2.3: Konstantinos VIII. (#23735); on Psellos, in general, see also Kaldellis, *Argument* (n. 3 above); C. Barber and D. Jenkins, eds., *Reading Michael Psellos* (Leiden-Boston, 2006); Karpozilos, *Historikoi* 3:59–154; most recently, Papaioannou, *Michael Psellos* (n. 19 above); PmbZ 2, *Prolegomena*: 15–16.

35 One may ask, of course, if riding a horse requires less physical control than walking. If Constantine actually was in such poor physical condition as Psellos claims, one would expect him to use a litter. But Psellos is not concerned with such details.

36 Niketas Choniates, *History* 42.20–46.40; A. Meineke, *Ioannis Cinnami Epitome rerum ab Ioanne et Alexio Comnenis Gestarum*,

One could, of course, counter that speeches of that type were always fabrications, in which the authors put words into the speaker's mouth according to what the author thought the speaker should have said. We will discuss the inherent complications later. In this specific case, however, it is evident that Manuel's speech was meant to legitimize Manuel as emperor. Even if deemed a fabrication, it is employed to pursue concrete political intentions. Moreover, the—supposed—artistic freedom granted to authors of speeches of this kind naturally makes it all the more easy for them—or their sources—to use these to pursue their own objectives, which goes quite beyond any literary shaping of what is said.

Conclusions

Examples of deliberate, tendentious shaping in historiography are veritably inexhaustible and, therefore, entirely variable. We shall thus refrain from presenting further examples, since the fundamental problem would not change. Historiographers have always falsified their accounts to portray their heroes more positively and their adversaries more negatively. This is not a special feature of medieval or Byzantine sources. We must, nevertheless, ask ourselves if this explanation is truly sufficient. Might it not, perhaps, merely reflect our own prejudices? Our interpretation clearly implies that Theophanes and his colleagues could have done better. Only for personal and/or ideological reasons did they deviate from fact. The fundamental image thus remains intact, and these deviations are merely "individual errors" of the respective authors, who fell short of their own demands. Some of the above examples demonstrate, however, that we are only in part dealing with "error," since the contradictions are so obvious. It must have been clear to the readers from the outset that this information was false, or so grossly inflated and exaggerated that it had to be false and could by no means be taken seriously. One might ask, therefore, if this exaggeration and its inherent

implausibility is indicative of a different concept of historiography than we assume.

2. Characterization by Deeds

Byzantine texts often present people doing entirely unrealistic things that cannot under any circumstances be taken seriously. The question is whether this is an indication of the author's inability to discern reality from fiction, whether the delight in fabulating predominated, or whether we are perhaps dealing with a specific and quite rational design—perhaps even a literary technique.

Examples

The chronicler Niketas Choniates describes in his *Chronike diegesis* the dignitary John of Poutze (ὁ ἐκ Πούτζης Ἰωάννης), a leading minister of finance under Emperor John II Komnenos. Niketas Choniates exhibits a strong dislike for John of Poutze, although he could not have known him personally and can only have received his information through his sources and other authorities. He accuses him of having persuaded John II to forgo maintaining the provincial fleets—ships and crews—for financial reasons, and to replace them by a tax. This diminished the empire's maritime power and caused great damage in the times that followed. Whether or not this is true is still a matter of debate.³⁷ The issue in our inquiry is another, because Niketas proceeds to describe John's character:

Up to this time John had proved himself to be a public-spirited minister of finance, a shrewd and niggardly steward, and an exacting collector of taxes from usurers, and his power was absolute; he could do whatever he wished without question, and whatever he wished was possible. Realizing that his rank and influence might be transferred to another, his freedom of speech rescinded, and his power undermined in no time, and that others, raised to power by the emperor, might violently attack and

CSHB (Bonn, 1836), 26.5–28.16; in I. Bekker's edition for CSHB ([Bonn, 1836], 56.4–61.20), Niketas's account comprises 137 lines, that of Kinnamos only 57; on this, see Lilie, "Niketas Choniates und Ioannes Kinnamos" (n. 4 above); see also Simpson, *Niketas Choniates* (n. 4 above), 28; on Niketas Choniates, in general, see also Karpozilos, *Historikoi* 3:699–788; very useful is the volume published in 2009 by Simpson and Efthymiadis, *Niketas Choniates* (n. 4 above).

37 Niketas Choniates, *History* 54.75–56.24; see the discussion in R.-J. Lilie, *Handel und Politik zwischen dem Byzantinischen Reich und den italienischen Kommunen Venedig, Pisa und Genua in der Epoche der Komnenen und der Angeloi (1081–1204)* (Amsterdam, 1984), 625–27.

subvert his position, he pulled down all proper limitations to his authority and, taking advantage of both time and circumstances, clung to both and embraced them. Addressing one of his confidants with the words, "Come, let us enrich ourselves," he became a completely different man; reversing forthwith his tactics, he devoted himself to unjust gain as no other man of that time . . . Married to a woman from among the rejected and withered nobility, he lavished great wealth on his children, sufficient to indulge their pleasures. But otherwise he was parsimonious, a niggard and a miser who never raised his eyelids to gaze upon the poor; he was attached to wealth, which held him permanently fettered in unbreakable and indissoluble bonds, a virtual prisoner, just as Akrisios kept Danaë long ago. Mean and stingy, he would often send comestibles that had been given to him to a shop to be sold: for example, he would return the huge and fat flatfish and bass which he had received as many as three different times, to be purchased as many times and in turn by others who had need of his services. And the fish straightway became fishers, exchanging roles, as though they were letting down the large fishhook, placing soft fat on it as bait, and thus pulling into their habitat the passers-by.³⁸

John of Poutze, for all appearances, belonged to the circle of officials who had been influential under Emperor John II Komnenos, but then lost their authority under Manuel I in the course of the usual reshuffling of the higher administration under a new emperor. It would not be surprising if he had then begun devoting himself to augmenting his wealth. The historian's choice of words (for example, 56.39–40: καὶ γυναῖκα τῶν ἀπερριμμένων καὶ ἀπηνθηκυῶν εὐγενῶν ἀρμολάμενος . . .) is indeed drastic, yet the claim need not necessarily be untrue. The following example, however, is absurd from any perspective: Niketas unmistakably implies that John began amassing wealth only after

his power began to decline. As an example, he relates how he would repeatedly return fish he had been given as a gift to the market to be resold to yet another petitioner, who would then give it back to him, and so on. We do know, from many examples, that it was customary in Byzantium to exchange gifts of fish, animals, or roasts, as well as of fruit, and so forth. Irrespective of any considerations of the quality of the fish that was repeatedly bought, given, and sold, the accumulated sums—even for a very fine fish—would have been entirely irrelevant for such a top finance official, who had supposedly amassed such incredible riches. Moreover, why would anyone have felt compelled to bribe someone who had lost his influence with gifts of this kind? Niketas's intent in presenting such a tall tale—and two similar ones follow—can only have been to defame his protagonist as much as possible, more than a mere list of actual attempts of bribery—which certainly existed, although the chronicler appears to have no detailed knowledge of this—would have accomplished.³⁹

This approach is even more evident in the following example, also found in Niketas Choniates. It concerns the logothete John Kamateros, whom the historian accuses of being insatiably greedy. In support of this accusation, Niketas presents several examples, two of which we quote here: "[John] Kamateros once wagered with emperor Manuel that he could drink dry the purple wine bowl once positioned at the outer door of emperor Nikephoros's bedchamber . . . The wine bowl, which held one and one half gallons, was filled to the brim: stooping over like an ox, he emptied the vessel, coming up for air but once, and received forthwith from the emperor the items stipulated in the wager."⁴⁰

As if this did not suffice, Niketas proceeds to relate yet another story: "Unable to resist eating green beans, Kamateros tore, rather than plucked, them off the young shoot. He consumed whole fields or, to be more exact, he swooped down on them like a bird. Once, when encamped at a riverside, he observed a field of beans on the other side. He removed his tunic, swam across, and gulped down the greater part of the crop.

38 Niketas Choniates, *History* 56.25–57.52; trans. Magoulias, 33; on John of Poutze, see also Simpson, *Niketas Choniates*, 26; and especially Efthymiadis, *Niketas Choniates*, 48–49.

39 Niketas could not have known on his own account the period in which John of Poutze was active, but could have informed himself only through his sources, or possibly through eyewitnesses.

40 Niketas Choniates, *History* 114.15–28; trans. Magoulias, 65.

But he did not stop there. Stacking in bundles what he had not devoured and lifting these onto his shoulders, he quickly crossed the river and then sat himself down on the floor of his tent and contentedly gobbled up the beans as if he had gone without eating or drinking for a long time."⁴¹

The author's ridiculous hyperbole is obvious. Niketas does not even hesitate to indirectly admit as much when he writes: καὶ ταῦτα μὲν οὕτω καὶ οὐ κατὰ διήγησιν, οἶμαι, ἀλυσιτελῇ τοῖς πολλοῖς οὐδ' ἀκαλλῇ τε καὶ ἀχαρίτωτον ("The narration of these events as they happened is not, I trust, without profit, charm, and grace for most"). This statement is remarkable in that he designates this insertion as διήγησις. He thus assigns it to the same genre as his entire work, which is entitled *Χρονικὴ διήγησις* . . .⁴²

Again one might ask why Niketas embellishes his portrayal of the logothete John Kamateros with an episode so exaggerated that neither he nor his readers could ever perceive it as being true and thus take it seriously. The only possible reply is that it was of no significance to anyone, though perhaps the exaggeration itself was what Niketas sought. In the last two cases, the only apparent purpose of the episodes is to characterize the respective protagonists. Beyond that, they are irrelevant.⁴³

There are other cases, however, in which descriptions of this kind are embedded in the narrative, so that the question of factuality has a different significance, or is more difficult to answer. Anna Komnene describes, in a famous and much-cited passage, the positively diabolical cunning of the Norman Bohemond. When he realized that he would not be

able to continue the campaign against Byzantium successfully from his principality of Antioch, he left the principality and sailed back to southern Italy to raise support. Since the sailing routes between the Crusader states and Italy were under the control of the Byzantine fleet, however, he employed the following ruse to deceive the enemies:

Bohemond shuddered at the emperor's threats. Without means of defence . . . he invented a plan, not very dignified, but amazingly crafty. First he left the city of Antioch in the hands of his nephew Tancred, the son of the Marquis Odo; then he spread rumours everywhere about himself: "Bohemond," it was said, "is dead." While still alive he convinced the world that he had passed away. Faster than the beating of a bird's wings the story was propagated in all quarters: "Bohemond," it proclaimed, "is a corpse." When he perceived that the story had gone far enough, a wooden coffin was made and a bireme prepared. The coffin was placed on board and he, a still-breathing "corpse," sailed away from Soudi, the port of Antioch, for Rome. He was being transported by sea as a corpse. To outward appearance (the coffin and the behaviour of his companions) he was a corpse. At each stop the barbarians tore out their hair and paraded their mourning. But inside Bohemond, stretched out at full length, was a corpse only thus far; in other respects he was alive, breathing air in and out through hidden holes. That is how it was with the coastal places, but when the boat was out at sea, they shared their food with him and gave him attention; then once more there were the same dirges, the same tomfoolery. However, in order that the corpse might appear in a state of rare putrefaction, they strangled or cut the throat of a cock and put that in the coffin with him. By the fourth or fifth day at the most, the horrible stench was obvious to anyone who could smell. Those who had been deceived by the outward show thought the offensive odour emanated from Bohemond's body, but Bohemond himself derived more pleasure than anyone from his imaginary misfortune. For my part I wonder how on earth

41 Niketas Choniates, *History* 114.29–115.37; trans. Magoulias, 65; on this episode, see Simpson, *Niketas Choniates*, 21.

42 Niketas Choniates, *History* 115.44–46; trans. Magoulias, 65. One can, in a way, sense the chronicler's glee in being able to ridicule a person he dislikes. This was not confined to Niketas Choniates and John Kamateros, but is often encountered in this period; see, in general, L. Garland, "And His Head Shone like a Full Moon . . .": An Appreciation of the Byzantine Sense of Humour as Recorded in the Historical Sources of the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries," *Parergon* 8 (1990): 1–31.

43 This type of narration was not new in Niketas's day. Rather, he follows here the example of classical authors, especially from the period of the Second Sophistic, for example, Eunapios or Philostratos; see G. Fatouros, "Die Autoren der zweiten Sophistik im Geschichtswerk des Niketas Choniates," *JÖB* 29 (1980): 165–86; most recently, Simpson, "Workshop" (n. 20 above), 260–61.

he endured such a siege on his nose and still continued to live while being carried along with his dead companion. But that has taught me how hard it is to check all barbarians once they have set their hearts on something: there is nothing, however objectionable, which they will not bear when they have made up their minds once and for all to undergo self-inflicted suffering. This man Bohemond was not yet dead—he was dead only in pretence—yet he did not hesitate to live with dead bodies. In the world of our generation this ruse of Bohemond was unprecedented and unique, and its purpose was to bring about the downfall of the Roman Empire. Before it no barbarian or Greek devised such a plan against his enemies, nor, I fancy, will anyone in our lifetime ever see its like again. When he reached Corfu, as he had reached some mountain peak, as if the island were a place of refuge and he was now free from danger, he rose from the ‘presumed dead,’ left the coffin where his ‘corpse’ had lain, enjoyed the sunshine to the full, breathed in a cleaner air and walked round the city of Corfu. The inhabitants, seeing him dressed in outlandish barbarian clothes, inquired about his family, his condition, his name; they asked where he came from and to whom he was going. Bohemond treated them all with lofty disdain and demanded to see the duke of the city . . . Coming face to face with him, Bohemond, arrogant in look and attitude, speaking with an arrogant tongue in a language wholly barbaric, ordered him to send this communication to the emperor: “To you I, Bohemond, famous son of Robert, send this message. The past has taught you and your Empire how formidable are my bravery and my opposition . . . I want you to know that, although I was ‘dead,’ I have come back to life again; I have escaped your clutches. In the guise of a dead man I have avoided every eye, every hand, every plan. And now I live, I move, I breathe the air, and from the island of Corfu I send to your majesty offensive, hateful news . . . with many a murder I will make your cities and your provinces run with blood, until I set up my spear in Byzantium itself.”

Such was the extreme bombast in which the barbarian exulted.⁴⁴

There can be no doubt that Anna Komnene invented this entire story. The only true element is that Bohemond actually did return to Italy from Antioch in 1104/5, to resume his war against Byzantium from there with fresh resources. But the story itself is absurd and, tellingly enough, is not mentioned by a single Latin source. It is not only improbable, but so self-contradictory that it can only be a pure fabrication of Anna or another—oral or written—source.⁴⁵ In view of Anna’s literary ambition, we may assume that she invented it herself. Even the initial situation is insupportable. The supposed death of Bohemond would have caused serious problems in the rule over Antioch: while it posed no problem to have Bohemond’s nephew Tancred to rule as regent, he would certainly have encountered difficulties, because of the family relationship, in succeeding his (supposedly) dead uncle as prince of Antioch. If more than a bare minimum of people had learned of the scheme, one would hardly have been able to keep it secret. Even more outrageous is the story with the cock, with which Bohemond is supposed to have shared the coffin. One has only to try to imagine it to realize how preposterous the story is. And the ending is entirely illogical: after having successfully deceived every Byzantine guard at every harbor he put in, Bohemond is supposed to have discarded his disguise on the Byzantine island of Corfu,

44 Anna Komnene, *Alexiad* 11.12.17–81; trans. Sewter, 366–68.

45 Nevertheless, to this day her account is still given credence. See, for example, E. Albu, “Bohemond and the Rooster: Byzantines, Normans and the Artful Ruse,” in Gouma-Peterson, *Anna Komnene* (n. 19 above), 157–68, who collects a whole series of war ruses of this type, all of which she considers to be true, regardless of the varying degrees of probability; on Anna Komnene, in general, see Karpozilos, *Historikoi* 3:397–463; on Bohemond in Anna Komnene, see R.-J. Lilie, “Der erste Kreuzzug in der Darstellung Anna Komnenes,” in *Varia II, Beiträge*, ed. A. Berger et al., *Poikila Byzantina* 6 (Bonn, 1987), 49–148, esp. 95–100, 120–32; idem, “Anna Komnene und die Lateiner,” *BSI* 54 (1993): 169–82, at 174; idem, “Byzantinische Geschichtsschreibung im 12. Jahrhundert: Anna Komnene und Niketas Choniates,” in *Macht und Spiegel der Macht*, ed. Kersken and Vercamer, 433–56, esp. 437–41; J. Shepard, “When Greek Meets Greek: Alexius Comnenus and Bohemond in 1097–98,” *BMGS* 12 (1988): 185–277; in a broader context, see as well M. Mullett, “Bohemond’s Biceps: Male Beauty and the Female Gaze in the *Alexiad* of Anna Komnene,” in *Byzantine Masculinities*, ed. D. C. Smythe (Aldershot, forthcoming); I thank M. Mullett for kindly providing me with her manuscript.

of all places, and identified himself to the governor, disclosing his intentions in a lengthy speech, “in a language wholly barbaric,” nevertheless embellished with echoes of Homer and the New Testament. Bohemond seems to give no thought to the fact that the governor, in command of a border province with a garrison surely more powerful than any of those in the places into which Bohemond’s ship had previously docked on his trip, could have arrested him. But that is not the point. What is decisive is the remark about the barbarian Bohemond’s resolve to destroy the Byzantine Empire through his sheer inhuman endurance. This is consistent with the general characterization of Bohemond as a devil in human form throughout Anna Komnene’s work, and the entire story serves the sole purpose of impressing this characteristic of Bohemond on the reader’s mind in the most graphic way.⁴⁶

Another example is Emperor Michael III, whom the chronicle *Theophanes continuatus* accuses of having damaged the dignity of the empire. As proof, the chronicler specifies, among many other incidents, that the emperor participated in chariot races that were more important to him than defending the empire, and relates the following story:

One day he met a woman on the street, whose child was his godchild, as she came out of the baths, water pitcher in hand. He dismounted from his horse and sent the senators accompanying him off to the nearby palace, while he himself followed the woman, together with several unruly and disreputable men, took the pitcher from her hands and said: “Come now, woman, have no fear, take me into your home and serve me some bran bread and white cheese.” . . . Since the woman was left speechless by this outrageous suggestion and because she had nothing, neither table nor tablecloths, Michael, faster than it takes to tell, took the towel she had brought with her from the baths and spread it out on the ground like a tablecloth. Assuming the role of the woman, he himself was emperor, waiter, cook, and guest all in one. After he had dished up everything the poor woman’s larder

would yield, he feasted and dined with her, stressing that in this way he was imitating my Christ and God.⁴⁷ Thereupon he walked from there on foot to the palace, foolishly mocking the presumptuousness and conceit of the former emperors. If they had heard this empty prattle, they would have said: “It is improper for you to mock us, since all you do is play around and play pranks. Instead you should take up the distress and privations of waging war and appreciate eating with the soldiers, but not with depraved women innkeepers.” All this rendered Michael detestable and very justly brought the wrath of God upon him.⁴⁸

This episode, also much discussed by scholars, is not only absurd but self-contradictory. The woman’s child was a godchild of the emperor: mother and child were therefore (ritually) related to him. The family must, then, have belonged to the emperor’s extended entourage at the very least, as is attested by the emperor’s recognition of the woman when they accidentally meet on the street and his self-invitation into her home. She is, nevertheless, so poor that she owns neither table nor tablecloth. Significantly, another author attempts to solve this conflict by claiming that Michael had given the husband fifty nomismata, a substantial sum, yet still not sufficient to adequately furnish that place, as Michael III supposedly assumed.⁴⁹ Furthermore, at

47 The chronicler is thoroughly personal, referring to “my Christ and my God”: τὴν μίμησιν πρὸς τὸν ἐμὸν ἀναφέρων Χριστὸν καὶ θεόν. Scott, “Events,” 52, following a suggestion of P. Karlin-Hayter, considers this statement a modification of Michael’s III original propaganda into its opposite. I have my doubts, however, that one can derive from this single sentence any specific conclusions concerning the propaganda of Michael III.

48 Theoph. cont. 4.37, pp. 199.11–200.14.

49 Pseudo-Symeon: I. Bekker, *Symeonis magistri ac logothetae annales*: Συμεὼν μαγίστρου καὶ λογοθέτου χρονογραφία, in I. Bekker, ed., *Theophanes continuatus* (Bonn, 1838), 603–760, 660.17–661.12; on the gift of money, see 661.4–5: τάχα που ἀπὸ ν’ νομισμάτων, ἅπερ δέδωκε τῷ ἀνδρὶ αὐτῆς, ὑπολαμβάνων τι κεκτησθαι ταύτην. Skylitzes, who follows Theoph. cont. here, tones down his account by stating that the woman had nothing to offer the emperor to eat, which leaves the question of her social status open. Otherwise, he follows Theoph. cont. quite closely and only abridges him: Σύνοψις ἱστοριῶν ἀρχομένη ἀπὸ τῆς ἀναιρέσεως Νικηφόρου βασιλέως τοῦ ἀπὸ γενικῶν καὶ μέχρι τῆς βασιλείας Ἰσαακίου τοῦ Κομνηνοῦ συγγραφείσα παρὰ Ἰωάννου κουροπαλάτου καὶ γεγονότος μεγάλου δρουγγαρίου τῆς βίβλας τοῦ Σκυλίτζη, in

46 On Anna Komnene’s characterization of Bohemond, see Lilie, “Anna Komnene,” 95–100; Shepard, “When Greek Meets Greek,” passim.

the end of the story the woman is denounced as an innkeeper and, more or less, as a prostitute as well (she is one of the *γυναίκων καπηλίδων καὶ μοχθηρῶν*). But again, the question of the scene's truth is irrelevant to the author's intention, which was not to relate a factual incident, but to demonstrate in the most drastic way possible that Michael was unworthy to reign. This unworthiness is underscored further when the chronicler has the emperor denigrate even his predecessors, then allows these emperors to respond in person. The political context for this entire scene is, of course, Basil's later usurpation, which scenes like this were to justify and more or less prepare for in advance.

In his interpretation of this passage, J. N. Ljubarskij rightly emphasized echoes of mime, the relatively crude performances of a type of folk theater, on which C. Ludwig has contributed further observations.⁵⁰ Contact with people from this milieu undermined the dignity of an emperor, making it all the more easy to defame him by merely hinting at such contacts. This accusation, incidentally, of undermining an emperor's dignity by excessive familiarity

I. Thurn, *Ioannis Scylitzae Synopsis historiarum*, CFHB 5, (Berlin, 1973), 109.8–23: "One day he met a woman on her way back from the baths, pitcher in hand; it transpired that he had stood godfather for her child at the sacred font. He got down from his horse, sent all the senators who were keeping him company to the palace which was close by and, taking with him some useless, debauched specimens of humanity whom he knew and maintained, went off with the woman. He took the pitcher from her hands and said: 'Come on, woman; receive me as your guest without fear; I need some rye bread and white cheese.' There she stood, rooted to the spot by what he had said, fully aware that she had nothing with which to entertain him, but in less time than it takes to tell, Michael took the towel the woman was bringing back from the baths, still damp, and spread it out on the ground as though it were a tablecloth. Assuming the role of the woman, he himself was host, emperor, cook, waiter and guest all in one. When he had dined with the woman, off he went to the palace, walking—on foot!—and complaining about the excessive foolishness and affectation of the former emperors (who, in fact, behaved quite appropriately) . . . This all conspired to render the man hateful, and the wrath of everybody rose up—quite justly—against him" (*A Synopsis of Byzantine History*, 811–1057, trans. J. Wortley [Cambridge, 2010], 110).

50 J. N. Ljubarskij, "Der Kaiser als Mime: Zum Problem der Gestalt des byzantinischen Kaisers Michael III.," *JÖB* 37 (1987): 39–50; on *Mimus* in general see also C. Ludwig, *Sonderformen byzantinischer Hagiographie und ihr literarisches Vorbild: Untersuchungen zu den Viten des Asop, des Philaretos, des Symeon Salos und des Andreas Salos*, BBS 3 (Frankfurt, 1997), 369–72.

with the world of the theater, sporting contests, and chariot races was directed at several emperors, such as Philippikos Bardanes and Constantine VIII, among others. We might well ask, therefore, if such claims in the context of emperor defamations might not be a *topos*.⁵¹ It certainly cannot be ruled out that they could be true, as the best-known example illustrates: Justinian I, whose wife Theodora originated from a theatrical or circus milieu.

One exceptional case in this context is the episode described by Genesios, in which Emperor Basil I defeats a Bulgarian wrestler:

The ruler of the Bulgarians boasted that one of his wrestlers was invincible in the arena. He sent this man to the Imperial City, full of hopes that he would prevail. The Emperor could not bear this affront, but he changed his mood to joy by entering the arena himself to fight against this man, with the necessary secrecy of course. Taking off his Imperial attire he closed on his opponent. The Scythian failed entirely in his attempt to lift up the Macedonian. But the latter grabbed him readily with his strong hands, twirled him about by his neck, and threw him so forcefully against the ground that it required many buckets of water, much wine, and even drops of rose-water to revive him. For it seemed that he had almost died, and bled from his ears and nose. All who were present greatly marveled at the event, and the story is told even today.⁵²

With this type of behavior, the parvenu Basil had, on the one hand, violated the imperial dignity, while, on the other, simultaneously distinguished himself, as it were, as an undefeatable Byzantine hero. This

51 On Philippikos Bardanes, see pseudo-Michael Psellos, in W. J. Aerts, *Historia syntomos: Michaelis Pselli Historia syntomos*, CFHB 30 (Berlin-New York, 1990), 85.58–63; see PmbZ 1.3: Philippikos (#6150); on Constantine VIII, see above.

52 *Genesios: On the Reigns of the Emperors*, trans. and comm. A. Kaldellis, *ByzAus* 11 (Canberra, 1998), 112; A. Lesmueller-Werner and I. Thurn, *Iosephi Genesii regum libri quattuor*, CFHB 14 (Berlin, 1978), IV 40, p. 90.3–16; see, as well, PmbZ 1.5: Anonymus (#11861) and PmbZ 2.7: Anonymus (#30773); on Genesios in general see also Karpozilos, *Historikoi* 2:315–30; PmbZ 1, Prolegomena: 17; and PmbZ 2, Prolegomena: 10–11.

conforms with at least one aspect of the Byzantine ideal, since an emperor should ideally also surpass all men physically. The author attempts to compensate for the emperor's "misbehavior" by explicitly referring to the "necessary secrecy" (μετὰ προσηκούσης τῆς ἐπικρύψεως) in which the episode had transpired. Nevertheless, it did not remain secret. What is surprising about Genesios's account of the episode is that it is a duplicate of a wrestling match earlier in Basil's career, occurring long before his crowning as emperor. This wrestling match is also mentioned by Theophanes continuatus and Skylitzes, where it also occurs, as in the first of the two episodes in Genesios, early in Basil's career, long before his coronation.⁵³ If one does not wish to presume that Genesios duplicated this event unintentionally, one could attribute his motives to the ambiguity of Basil I's image: on the one hand, he was regarded as a competent emperor, almost comparable to the heroes of antiquity;⁵⁴ on the other hand, he was at the same time an upstart, who could not be trusted to behave like a "true" emperor. This ambivalence would have been illustrated with a corresponding portrayal. It is very possible that Basil's first wrestling match actually took place. The second is more likely an invention of Genesios, perhaps also inspired by the preceding descriptions of Basil's physical accomplishments.

All the previous examples point out negative personal traits, which may be attributable, in part, to the usual attribution of more interesting stories and roles to villains than to "decent" people. But, of course, illustrative examples for the latter may also be found. In this particular context, this would be Emperor Theophilos, who is, on the one hand, condemned as the last of the Iconoclast emperors, and on the other hand—for reasons not known—also features as the proverbially just emperor. A number of chroniclers relate the story of a widow who had approached Emperor Theophilos to complain that her house was now deprived of all light by an apparently illegal building erected by Petronas, a brother-in-law of the emperor. Theophilos ordered an inquiry that

declared the widow's grievance legitimate. Petronas was sentenced to public scourging, his house was demolished, and the property awarded, together with the building materials, to the widow.⁵⁵ This story was apparently so popular that chroniclers up to the late Byzantine period cited it repeatedly. But here again, the amount of truth to it is probably very small, especially when one recalls that Petronas was a brother of Empress Theodora. A similar episode is found in the *Narratio de Theophili benefactis* (BHG 1735), where a ship that a high official had misappropriated is restored to a widow, and the miscreant is banished. The *Patria* embellish the tale even further, but both these versions adopt and adapt a story that originates in the fourth century. Even though the original story cannot be found in the historical works of the ninth century, the elements are nonetheless quite similar.⁵⁶ One claim that might contain a kernel of truth is that Theophilos had the assassins of Emperor Leo V executed.⁵⁷ However, one should remain skeptical, since Theophilos's own father, Michael II, was co-conspirator in the assassination and its beneficiary, as he was proclaimed and crowned the new emperor as a result. It is not very credible that Theophilos would have dissociated himself from his father in this manner. One could also interpret the alleged punishment as the typical reshuffling at the beginning of a new reign, in which Theophilos ousted the old partisans of his father and predecessor Michael II. Later, this consolidation of power was reinterpreted as a highly developed sense of justice and embellished with appropriate examples, perhaps by associates of the emperor for propaganda purposes.

Characterizations by specific deeds may be repeatedly discovered. They are, of course, ideally suited to

53 Theoph. cont. 5.12, pp. 229.1–230.11 (Bekker); 46.1–49.39 (Ševčenko); Skylitzes, *Synopsis* 94.62–65; Genesios, *Reigns of the Emperors* 4.26, p. 78.19–30.

54 Genesios alludes to this when he refers to the wrestlers as a Scythian and a Macedonian.

55 Symeon log. 130.10, pp. 218.51–219.66; pseudo-Symeon 627.19–628.3; Georgius Monachus continuatus, in I. Bekker, Γεωργίου τοῦ μοναχοῦ βίοι τῶν νέων βασιλέων, in Theoph. cont. 761–924, 793.17–794.11; T. Büttner-Wobst, *Ioannis Zonarae epitome historiarum libri XIII–XVIII* (Bonn, 1897), 15.25, pp. 356.1–357.43. On this incident and for additional sources, see also PmbZ 1.3: Petronas (#5929), as well as 1.5: Anonyma (#10089).

56 Περὶ τῶν ἀγαθοεργιῶν Θεοφίλου τοῦ βασιλέως, *De Theophili imperatoris benefactis*, BHG 1735, ed. W. Regel, in idem, ed., *Analecta Byzantino-Russica* (Petrograd, 1891), 40–43, 40.17–22; *Patria* 3.28, pp. 223.10–224.14. On the widow, see PmbZ 1.5: Anonyma (#10095); see as well below, 198–99.

57 Theoph. cont. 3.1, pp. 85.4–86.18; for additional sources, see PmbZ 1.4: Theophilos (#8157), n. 15.

tendentious narratives. Some can, nevertheless, be impartial, or the bias exhibited in the narration can be more general, not directed at specific political or social developments. Let one small example suffice, to demonstrate the great variety of ways these inserted episodes could be used: Leo the Deacon describes on the occasion of Emperor John I Tzimiskes' 972 campaign against Syria the fate of the scribe Niketas:

To his misfortune a certain secretary named Niketas, an extremely knowledgeable and intelligent man, and in the prime of life, accompanied the emperor on this campaign, even though his father entreated him at length not to do this, but urged him rather to stay at home and look after his father in his old age and care for him to the best of his ability, since he was on the threshold of old age and would soon move into the sunset of life. But he ignored his father's bidding, as he should not have, and disregarded his admonitions, and, equipping himself as best he could, went off to the army encampment. But while he was crossing the river, he was made dizzy by the depth of the water, and slipped off his horse and fell into the river, and was carried off by the current, and drowned wretchedly, receiving a watery death in the Euphrates as the price of his disobedience.⁵⁸

How did the author learn about the father's alleged requests? Moreover, an imperial scribe should have had an income sufficient to secure his father's care even in the event of the son's absence, regardless of any other relatives Niketas probably had. Whether Niketas joined the campaign voluntarily or by order of his superior is not revealed. Leo the Deacon nevertheless presents the accident as a just punishment, so to speak, for the son's supposed disobedience of his father, conferring a general moral component to the accident, to the disadvantage, of course, of the thus-defamed Niketas. The

actual incident—death by drowning—is real, yet it is depicted in such a way as to allow a negative judgment on the victim's character. Whether or not the father actually did request that his son not join the campaign is ultimately irrelevant.

From this perspective, many events can be called into question that have previously been generally considered true. For example, the account that Michael III was disrupted in the middle of a chariot race in which he himself was participating as driver by the announcement of an Arab attack. The announcement, according to the chronicler, was transmitted by the so-called "optical telegraph," whereupon Michael III ordered the entire system destroyed.⁵⁹ Aside from the questionable existence and effectiveness of this system of beacons and, if it did exist, the multiple possible reasons for its termination, one might yet again interpret this episode as a characterization of Michael III illustrated by a specifically fabricated example. The effectiveness is doubled here, in that, first, Michael III was participating as driver in a chariot race, which was incompatible with the dignity of an emperor, and, second, that he flagrantly neglected the welfare of the empire in favor of his personal entertainment.

One final example in this context is the defeat of Emperor Nikephoros I against the Bulgars in the summer of 811. Nikephoros had initially succeeded in invading Bulgaria and advanced to their capital Pliska, rejecting Bulgar peace offers. On retreat, however, his army was ambushed and largely destroyed. Nikephoros was killed, and his skull was supposedly made into a drinking cup for the Bulgar Khan Krum.⁶⁰ There is certainly no doubt about the defeat as such, but are the dramatic details true, or are they a feature added by the chronicler to justify the emperor's doom and to illustrate it in a sensationalistic manner? Theophanes loathed Nikephoros I and had nothing redeeming to relate about him. Nikephoros's initial rebuff of Krum's offer of peace negotiations could also be regarded as an indication of the emperor's hubris, and the story about the skull the just punishment for his previous behavior.

58 *The History of Leo the Deacon: Byzantine Military Expansion in the Tenth Century*, trans. A.-M. Talbot and D. F. Sullivan (Washington, D.C., 2005), 203; K. Benedict Hase, *Leonis Diaconi Caloënsis Historiae Libri Decem et Liber de Velitatione Bellica Nicephori Augusti* (Bonn, 1828), 1–178, 10.1, p. 161.2–15; ; on Leo the Deacon, in general, see Kazhdan, *Literature*, 2:278–90; Karpozilos, *Historikoi* 2:475–525; PmbZ 2, Prolegomena: 12–13.

59 Theoph. cont. 4.34–35, p. 197.8–198.12; a similar account is found in I. J. Reiske, *Constantini Porphyrogeniti imperatoris De Cerimoniis aulae byzantinae libri duo* (Bonn, 1829–1830), 1.493.11–19; on this see PmbZ 1.3: Michael III. (#4991); 1.5: Anonymus (#12025).

60 Theophanes, *Chronicle* 490.4–491.22; with additional sources, see PmbZ 1.2: Krum (#4164); 1.3: Nikephoros I. (#5252).

At the same time, the Bulgar Krum is portrayed as a barbarian, who could be believed capable of anything. Many ethnicities were known for their “reuse” of the body parts of defeated enemies, and it might well have been common knowledge in Byzantium; perhaps the transformation of a skull into a cup was even adopted from an earlier classical source.⁶¹ Therefore, the event might very well have occurred as described in the chronicle of Theophanes. It might just as well be an attempt to comment on the disaster with additional, entirely fabricated details. We are thus unable to determine with certainty the historicity of the described scenes.⁶²

Conclusions

The examples clearly demonstrate that for Byzantine authors it often did not suffice to characterize a person by applying the appropriate adjectives. They would instead enhance characterizations with anecdotes presenting that person at an exemplary act, so as to create a more vivid representation.⁶³ The examples also demonstrate that the truth-value of these interpolated anecdotes was relatively insignificant. What was important was that the personality of the person described became evident in a most striking way. No reader would have believed for an instant that John Kamateros actually grazed away an entire field of beans, or that Bohemund spent days if not weeks in a closed coffin with a dead cock as perfume substitute. The authorial objective was to present not a realistic

narrative but instead the most sensational example possible that might best highlight the characteristics of the person portrayed.

All the examples presented here are obviously unrealistic. This stylistic feature, however, bears hazards for any analysis when the examples are less extreme and, in themselves, appear credible. In the previous section we cited an example of a defamatory portrayal of Emperor Constantine VIII, in which he was first berated for not being able to walk even short distances because of his dissolute lifestyle. In the next paragraph he is accused of undermining imperial dignity by participating in gymnastics competitions. Neither claim is necessarily impossible, but they are mutually exclusive. When the technique of illustrating a person’s character by deeds is included in the analysis, it becomes evident, however, that both anecdotes are likely invented. This would not have been a deception of the reader, as it might be perceived today, but normal practice in Byzantine historiography, which readers would have recognized and probably also expected. The same goes for the supposed wrestling match of Basil I. Indeed, one might even regard Psellos’s antithetical juxtaposition of the episodes as a heightening of this rhetorical stylistic device.

The characterization of a person through illustrative examples—whether fabricated or not—was a widespread practice in Byzantine historiography (and not only there). In essence, the truth of an episode was largely insignificant; what mattered was its effect and its memorability. The stylistic device of “characterization by deeds” was one of the most important and widespread employed by Byzantine historiographers, and could be effortlessly combined with other stylistic devices, for which reason it has received such extensive discussion here.

3. Sensationalism and Overdramatization

Sensationalism in this context is to be understood as the deliberate exaggeration, sometimes even the invention, of events. The underlying motive for this conscious modification of sources—even oral sources—is, in part, to render an event or action more dramatic. Sensationalism, of course, frequently overlaps with other stylistic devices, especially with “characterization by deeds.” Our problem is to recognize whether the sensationalistic narratives are true (and if so to what

61 In the case of Theophanes, we are inclined to doubt this, however, since he did not need to resort to written sources here, but was able to rely on oral descriptions, the reliability of which cannot be determined, of course.

62 One parallel case is the fate of Svjatoslav after 971, whose skull was also supposedly used as a drinking cup: see PmbZ 2.6: Svjatoslav (#27740) with n. 19.

63 See S. Efthymiadis, “Niketas Choniates: The Writer,” in Simpson and Efthymiadis, *Niketas Choniates* (n. 4 above), 35–58, at 48, who observes: “For Choniates an action must be consistent with the character of a person. Every detail in his/her description, whether it is in terms of diction or metaphor, must both suggest and highlight the character evoked.” Unfortunately, Efthymiadis does not specifically address the issue as to whether or not an author (i.e., Niketas) would also invent actions in order to better characterize the respective person portrayed. The other examples Efthymiadis discusses in this section demonstrate that this practice was not confined to Niketas, but was very common for most of the Byzantine historiographers.

extent), or whether they are perhaps based on at least a kernel of truth.

Examples

Certain situations were particularly suited to literary embellishment, especially those concerning the emperor and the outstanding events of his reign: his gain of power, his downfall, and his death. Let us consider, as one of many examples, the account of Basil I's death while hunting in 886. Numerous sources agree, although some with reservations, that the emperor encountered on a hunting trip a great hart and tried to kill it, whereby the hart's antlers were caught in the emperor's belt. The hart lifted the emperor out of his saddle and carried him off over many kilometers. Finally, one of the emperor's attendants managed to slice the belt with his sword, so that the emperor fell to the ground. Basil, however, had sustained such severe injuries from the hart that he died. Prior to his death, however, he ordered the execution of the man who had cut his belt and thus saved him, because no one was allowed to draw his sword in the presence of the emperor.⁶⁴

The account is entirely unrealistic: no hart, no matter how large, would have been able to carry a man as large as Basil I—he is consistently described as heavy—over a distance of many kilometers. Further,

it would surely have been impossible for an attendant to hack with a sword precisely through the emperor's belt, while the emperor was being carried at full gallop through the forest on the hart's antlers. A final tragic moment arises when the emperor's rescuer is executed for having employed an illegal method for the rescue.

All things considered, the account is clearly a sensationalist exaggeration of what actually occurred, though the account itself may allude to fact. The inclusion of the episode about the punishment of the bodyguard does not appear entirely coincidental: a few years prior, Leo, Basil's son, supposedly carried a sword while hunting (!) in his father's presence so as to protect his father. Later, the traitor Theodoros Santabarenos, who had supposedly counseled Leo to do so, divulged Leo's transgression to the emperor. Basil thereupon deposed him as co-emperor and put him under house arrest, until both were miraculously reconciled. The motif that no one is permitted to draw a weapon in an emperor's presence was thus reused in another variation in the account of Basil's death.⁶⁵ The unanimity of almost all the sources in relating the circumstances of Basil's death in this form and with roughly the same set of details demonstrates that the legend—that is, its first literary elaboration—must have begun evolving shortly after the event itself, serving later authors directly or indirectly as source.⁶⁶

Deaths of emperors offered ambitious authors an ideal opportunity to stage events creatively and dramatically. One brilliant example is provided by Leo the Deacon in his account of Nikephoros II Phokas's

64 Sources on the death by hunting accident: Symeon log. 132.174–81; Georg. mon. cont. 848.10–15; pseudo-Symeon 699.1–20; Zonaras, *Epitome* 16.11, p. 439.17–440.5; pseudo-Michael Psellos, *Historia syntomos* 99, p. 88.93–97; P. Karlin-Hayter, *Vita S. Euthymii patriarchae CP*, Text, Translation, Introduction and Commentary, Bibliothèque de Byzantion 3 (Brussels, 1970), 3–147, p. 3.1–5.32. The *Vita Euthymii* does not mention the execution of the soldier who freed the emperor, whereas Skylitzes, *Synopsis* 170.47–48, knows nothing about a hunting accident, but has Basil die of diarrhea (διαρροίας νόσος). Similarly the *Bios kai politia tis agias kai endoxou daumatourgou basilidos Theophanō* (= *Vita Theophani* [BHG 1794]), in E. Kurtz, “Zwei griechische Texte über die hl. Theophano, die Gemahlin Kaiser Leos VI.,” *Mém. Acad. Imp. Pétersbourg*, VIII^e sér., 3.2 (1898): cap. 20, p. 14.3–4, speaks of illness and age (Βασίλειος νόσῳ καὶ γῆρα καμψθεῖς, τῇ φυσικῇ κατηπείγετο διαλύσει), but also makes no mention of a hunting accident. The same is true of the, albeit extremely brief, *Sermo in Theophano* (BHG 1795): Τοῦ σοφωτάτου κυροῦ Νικηφόρου τοῦ Γρηγοῦ λόγος εἰς τὴν ἁγίαν Θεοφανῶν τὴν βασιλίδαν, ed. E. Kurtz, *ibid.*, 25–45, cap. 20, p. 39.31–32; see, as well, A. Markopoulos, “Kaiser Basileios I. und Hippolytos: Sage und Geschichte,” in *Lesarten: Festschrift für Athanasios Kambylis*, ed. I. Vassilakis, G. S. Henrich, and D. R. Reinsch (Berlin-New York, 1998), 81–91; summary in PmbZ 1.1: Basileios I. (#832); PmbZ 2.1: Basileios I. (#20837).

65 Theoph. cont. 5.100–101, p. 348.10–351.21 (Bekker); 326.11–332.24 (Ševčenko); Skylitzes, *Synopsis* 168.82–170.46; Genesios, *Reigns of the Emperors* 4.29, p. 81.7–13; Symeon log. 132.136–56; pseudo-Symeon 697.3–699.8; abridged: pseudo-Michael Psellos, *Historia syntomos* 99, p. 88.81–83; *Vita Theophani* (BHG 1794), cap. 19, p. 13.14–15; *Sermo in Theophano* (BHG 1795), cap. 19, p. 39.28–29; *Synaxarium ecclesiae Constantinopolitanae e codice Sirmondiano nunc Berolinensi adiectis synaxariis selectis opera et studio H. Delehaye* (Brussels, 1902; reprint 1972), 315.5–6 (16. December); Theoph. cont. and Symeon log. relate the evil counsel of Santabarenos and Leo's subsequent behavior that led to his temporary deposition; on Santabarenos, see PmbZ 2.6: Theodoros Santabarenos (#27619).

66 R. J. H. Jenkins, *Byzantium: The Imperial Centuries AD 610–1071* (London, 1966; repr. Lancaster, 1994), 197, infers from the different accounts in the sources that Basil was killed by his sons, or on their order. Subsequent scholarship has largely rejected this hypothesis.

assassination by John I Tzimiskes in 969. The narrative begins by relating how Empress Theophano had fallen in love with Tzimiskes, because she felt neglected by her husband. She interceded on behalf of Tzimiskes—who had fallen out of favor with Nikephoros and lost his offices—and succeeded in having him called to the imperial court. She then plotted Nikephoros's murder with him. She secretly let Tzimiskes' co-conspirators into the palace and hid them in her chambers. The emperor was warned of the plot by a cleric, but the palace was negligently searched so the conspirators remained undetected.⁶⁷ Tzimiskes himself came with other retainers by ship at night to the seaward walls of the Boukoleon Palace, where they were drawn up to the top of the wall in a basket. They reached the emperor's bedchamber—unguarded of course—which Nikephoros had left unbolted because Theophano had pretended she would come to his room later. The conspirators stepped into the room, but—and here we see a device designed to heighten suspense—could not find the emperor at first; he was not in his bed, but was instead sleeping on a fur on the floor in one corner of his room. They were about to flee, when a servant pointed to the emperor. He was awoken by a blow of a sword, then abused and derided, and finally struck dead by Tzimiskes himself. The entire narrative is written in a highly dramatic style and even embellished with quotations from the *Iliad*. It is in no way realistic; rather, it resembles a trashy novel. The empress is the morally guilty party, who arranges for her husband's murder out of erotic desire. The conspirators' twofold invasion of the palace is more than unlikely, and the entire murder scene appears to have been composed by the author for maximum effect. Nevertheless, for methodological reasons—a lack of further sources—one cannot entirely rule out Theophano's collaboration. Her motives, however, would have been less of a sexual nature. Rather, she apparently feared that Nikephoros would exclude her two sons from succession to the throne in favor of his own relations, or even have them emasculated. Such concerns, however, would have been contrary

67 To this corresponds the claim of Skylitzes, *Synopsis* 281.35–49, that the emperor's brother, Leo Phokas, was playing dice and therefore read too late the emperor's letter, which had ordered him to search the palace; on Leo Phokas, see PmbZ 2.4: Leon Phokas (#24423); in general, also Karpozilos, *Historikoi* 2:509–25.

to the chronicler's design, so any mention of them is carefully avoided.⁶⁸

One compelling example of how one concrete event can acquire increasingly sensationalistic features in successive authors is the death of Alexios I Komnenos and the seizure of power by his son John II Komnenos. Anna Komnene, recounting the deeds of her father about twenty years later, describes in detail Alexios's illness and death. Of her brother's seizure of power she merely relates that he stole out of the palace in which his father had died as soon as he realized his condition, and hurried to the Great Palace, while Constantinople was in turmoil: "The emperor's heir had already gone away to the house set apart for him, when he realized the emperor's . . . [condition?] he hastened his departure and went off quickly to the Great Palace. The city was at that time . . . in a state of confusion, but there was no absolute chaos."⁶⁹ Anna Komnene, an eyewitness, regarded her brother with antagonism and allegedly even attempted to overthrow him in favor of her husband. Nevertheless, while the account does contain implicit censure (John steals away from the deathbed), it remains otherwise brief and refrains from going into greater detail, aside from the lengthy description of her own and the empress's grief. John Zonaras provides more detail: his central

68 Leo the Deacon, *History* 87–89; on Theophano, see PmbZ 2.6: Theophano (#28125); on the events themselves, see most recently R.-J. Lilie, "Caesaropapismus in Byzanz? Patriarch Polyeuktos und Kaiser Ioannes I. Tzimiskes," in *Byzantina Mediterranea: Festschrift für Johannes Koder zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. K. Belke, E. Kitzinger, A. Külzer, and M. A. Stassinopoulou (Vienna, 2007), 387–97; the fear that Nikephoros planned the emasculation of Theophano's sons is found in Ioannes Zonaras (T. Büttner-Wobst, *Ioannis Zonarae epitome historiarum libri XIII–XVIII* [Bonn, 1897], 16, 28, p. 516.1–8), pseudo-Michael Psellos, (*Historia syntomos* 105, pp. 100.28–102.43), as well as in the generally well-informed Yahyā (I. Kratchkovsky and A. Vasiliev, *Histoire de Yahya-ibn-Sa'īd d'Antioche*, PO 18.5 [1924; repr. 1957], 8.28–29, pp. 130–31); ital. trans. *Yahyā al-Anṭakī, Cronache dell'Egitto fatimide e dell'impero bizantino 937–1033*, traduzione dall'arabo, introduzione a cura di B. Pirone (Milan, 1997), 8:25–28, p. 134–35; on the general literary impact of Nikephoros Phokas's murder, see also Kazhdan, *Literature* (n. 26 above), 2:287–89.

69 Anna Komnene, *Alexiad* 15.11.2–57: Ἀλλ' ὁ τῆς βασιλείας διάδοχος προφθάσας ὑπεξῆει πρὸς τὸ ἀποτεταγμένον αὐτῷ οἴκημα τὸν τοῦ βασιλέως ἐπιγνοὺς ἀνὰ νύκτα θάνατον καὶ ἐπέσπευδε τὴν ἐξέλευσιν καὶ ἠπείγετο κατὰ τὸ μέγα παλάτιον. Ἡ πόλις δὲ τὸ τηνικάδ' ἐκυκᾶτο ἅπασα· ἐταράχθη γάρ, οὐ μέντοι καὶ παντάπασιν συνεταράχθη; trans. Sewter, 512.

focus is on the dispute between John and the emperor's widow, who sought the imperial throne for her daughter Anna. According to John Zonaras, John personally informed himself of his father's condition and hurried to the Great Palace, accursed by his mother. John, on the other hand, together with others who were eyewitnesses, had declared that he acted with the consent of his father, who had even given him his ring. He was thereupon immediately acclaimed emperor in the Hagia Sophia. The author further embellishes the narrative by recounting how John was already welcomed as emperor on his way to the palace, and that he sent one of his men ahead to the Varangian Guard of the Great Palace. This messenger swore that Alexios was already dead, whereupon the Varangians granted access to the palace.⁷⁰

Zonaras's account appears entirely credible. The events may very well have transpired as he describes. The entire incident becomes dramatized later by Niketas Choniates, writing at the beginning of the thirteenth century. Here Alexios resorts to duplicity on his deathbed by declaring his son as his successor, while at the same time pretending to follow his wife's wish that he favor his daughter Anna Komnene and her husband. John secured his accession only through a trick: as he stood at Alexios's deathbed he secretly (or perhaps with Alexios's consent) removed the signet ring from his finger and hurried with it as proof, together with his supporters, to the Great Palace, while his mother, deceived in her aspirations, more or less collapsed and accused her husband of being the most devious of all mortals, even on his deathbed. John, in the meantime, was barred access to the Great Palace even with the signet ring, so he finally broke the doors down and forced his entry into the palace, which provided opportunity for the surrounding mob to storm and plunder the palace.⁷¹

In contrast, John Kinnamos merely relates very briefly that after Alexios's death he was succeeded by John, his chosen heir to the imperial throne. There

is mention neither of of intrigue nor of unrest in Constantinople.⁷²

The reasons for Anna Komnene's and Kinnamos's brevity are, of course, explicable. Kinnamos is an avid supporter of the Komnenian dynasty and therefore avoids any negative statements. Anna Komnene, after her failed attempt at usurpation, was forced to be cautious and therefore held back on direct attacks on her brother. Her overstatement manifests itself only in the portrayal of the empress's and her own extreme consternation. Zonaras has an ambivalent relationship to Alexios, yet his account seems believable. Only in Niketas Choniates is everything entirely exaggerated: John II more or less steals his father's signet ring, perhaps with his consent, then forces entry into the imperial palace, which is subsequently plundered by a mob. None of this is found in any other source. Niketas either had to have consulted other sources—as yet unknown to us—which would be surprising, considering his otherwise strong proximity to Kinnamos, who makes no mention of these details, or Niketas himself greatly overdramatized the known events. Since Niketas was otherwise favorably inclined to John II, his motive for this account could very well have been a sheer delight in sensationalism, as is evident in other passages as well.⁷³

The general practice of the dramatization of events is relatively clear, needing no further discussion here. Every battle account, for example, contains dramatizations of some kind, such as the single combats featured in Leo the Deacon's account of the various battles against the Rhos 970/71. Also, certain dramatic aspects of a battle could be highlighted—for example, the great defeat by the Bulgars in 917. According to the chronicler Skylitzes, the Bulgarian victory had been

72 Kinnamos, *History* 5.12–13: Ἀλεξίου τὸν βίον καταλυσάντος, Ἰωάννης καὶ πρότερον πρὸς τοῦ πατρὸς αὐτῷ μνηστευθεῖσαν τὴν βασιλείαν παρέλαβεν.

73 See, for example, the accounts on John of Poutze and John Kamateros, discussed above in "Characterization by Deeds"; on the different accounts of the succession in the chroniclers, see most recently Neville, *Heroes and Romans* (n. 10 above), 20–23, who perceives in Niketas Choniates a general censure of the entire Komnenian family, who are blamed for the fall of the empire and thus for the catastrophe of 1204. While this may be the case for the later emperors, especially those after Manuel I, Neville's argument for Alexios and John II does not seem, in my opinion, conclusive; see also, most recently, B. Hill, "Actions Speak Louder Than Words: Anna Komnene's Attempted Usurpation," in Gouma-Peterson, *Anna Komnene* (n. 19 above), 45–62.

70 Zonaras, *Epitome* 18.28, p. 761.15–764.5. Zonaras wrote shortly before or at the same time as Anna Komnene, in any case after 1118, while the *Alexiad* is dated to ca. the 1140s; on Zonaras, in general, see also Karpozilos, *Historikoi* 3:465–534; PmbZ 1, Prolegomena: 25; PmbZ 2, Prolegomena: 16–17.

71 Niketas Choniates, *History* 6; it may also be noted that Niketas, to a certain extent, models his account on the opening sequence of Xenophon's *Anabasis*; see Kaldellis, "Paradox" (n. 18 above), 78.

possible only because the horse of the Byzantine commander, who had briefly dismounted to refresh himself, galloped riderless through the Byzantine troops so that the soldiers believed their commander had fallen and took flight.⁷⁴

Less frequent—or less frequently proven—are cases in which battles are entirely invented in order to make the course of events appear more dramatic. Anna Komnene, for example, invented a battle in open field between the army of the Crusader commander Godfrey of Bouillon and the imperial troops. It never occurred in the way she describes, nor was it on the date she gives, Maundy Thursday 1097. Some historians have attempted to explain the discrepancy by suggesting that Anna combined various smaller skirmishes into one large battle. But such a battle never occurred. The date derives from Alexios I Komnenos's invasion of Constantinople on Maundy Thursday 1081 and the ensuing plunder of the city by his supporters. This reference to the previous sacrilege provides Anna Komnene the opportunity to underscore the Byzantines' fear of divine punishment and thus to further dramatize her account. Indeed, her entire portrayal of the First Crusade before Constantinople is characterized primarily by her device of contracting into just a few weeks events that had actually dragged on for over half a year, evoking in the reader an impression of extreme peril to Constantinople and the empire, when that danger had not, in truth, been very acute.⁷⁵

The scholar is repeatedly confronted with the fundamental issue of devising criteria with which to determine to what extent a certain piece of information incorporated into the work of an author was either

wholly invented, more or less modified, or perhaps even correctly conveyed. Even the famous appeals to "common sense" do not really help under these circumstances, because that which might seem illogical to us today does not necessarily correspond to mental attitudes of the past. We may observe this latter point in yet another example drawn from Anna Komnene: the lengthy negotiations of Emperor Alexios I Komnenos with the leaders of the First Crusade, who eventually swore oaths of fealty to the emperor. One of the few subordinates who managed to avoid the oath was Tancred, a nephew of the Norman commander Bohemond. The emperor finally summoned all leaders at the imperial encampment at Pelekanos and demanded oaths of fealty from those who had not previously sworn their allegiance.

Anna Komnene recounts: "Tancred, a man of independent spirit, protested that he owed allegiance to one man only, Bohemond, and that allegiance he hoped to keep till his dying day. He was pressed by the others, including even the emperor's kinsmen. With apparent indifference, fixing his gaze on the tent in which the emperor held the seat of honor (a tent more vast than any other in living memory) he said: 'If you fill it with money and give it to me, as well as the sums you have given to all the other counts, then I too will take the oath.'" A protest and tumult are said to have ensued, and Tancred finally, primarily because of Bohemond's and the other leaders' admonitions, swore the oath of fealty to the emperor.⁷⁶

The demands made by Tancred as described by Anna Komnene are plainly absurd. Tancred was a minor, insignificant subordinate leader, not yet twenty years of age, who gained stature only much later. Perhaps for this reason, Anna assigns him—in retrospect, as it were—a more prominent role in the First Crusade. Furthermore, since he served under Bohemond he was, in any case, bound to his orders. Bohemond could therefore easily have ordered him to pay homage to the emperor. The entire episode is indubitably meant to underscore, once again, the avarice and pompous arrogance—the hubris, that is—of the Occidentals in general and the Normans in particular. Without any further clues, one would certainly deem the episode unhistorical and tendentious.

74 On these single combats in the battles against the Rhos 970/71, see Leo the Deacon, *History* 9.2, p. 144.18–21; 9.6, p. 149.2–12; 9.8, p. 152.19–153.8; see also PmbZ 2.1: Anemas (#20421); 2.6: Svenald (#27439); on the battle of 917, see Skylitzes, *Synopsis* 203.79–204.17; see also PmbZ 2.4: Leon Phokas (#24408). The claim about the runaway horse can, of course, be true. In decisive battles Byzantine armies would often panic after the death of their commanders and be defeated. One extreme example is a battle in Syria in 998, in which the Byzantine commander Damianos Dalassenos was killed after winning a battle, whereupon his troops fell apart and were vanquished by the Arabs; for details see PmbZ 2.2: Damianos (#21379). Still, one should remain aware of sensationalistic elements in narratives of this kind; see also the following section: "Epic Elements."

75 Anna Komnene, *Alexiad* 10.9.78–80 (Battle of Maundy Thursday); on her account, Lilie, "Anna Komnene," 75–84.

76 Anna Komnene, *Alexiad* 11.3.54–61, pp. 329–30; trans. Sewter, 340–41.

Nevertheless, it must contain at least a kernel of truth, since it is confirmed, in part, by another independent source—and one with an entirely opposite tendency. The Latin chronicler Radulph of Caen reports in his *Gesta Tancredi* that the emperor offered him his entire tent to gain his support. Tancred rejected the gift, stating that he, as vassal of Bohemond and crusader, owed allegiance to no one but God and to God alone, not even to the Byzantine emperor.⁷⁷

The whole truth behind this episode can no longer be determined, since the two extant reports are too contradictory. Yet it cannot be denied that something occurred between Alexios and Tancred in which the imperial tent also played some role. In other words, the fact alone that a story seems to be sensational and out of the ordinary does not necessarily identify it as fictional, nor suggest that it must be dismissed as sensationalistic, tendentious, or the like.⁷⁸

Conclusions

Sensationalism, dramatization, and tendentious exaggeration cannot always be clearly distinguished, especially when an author is quite free to unite delight in sensationalism with deliberate tendentious modification. Very often we can no longer discern whether the information is correct or invented, whether it has been overstated or placed in a tendentious context according to criteria we are unable to comprehend, especially when other sources are unavailable for comparison. The chances are probably slim of finding universally applicable criteria of judgment. Moreover, there is always the inherent danger of regarding our own perspective as absolute, and applying this as the standard for judging the rationality of narratives founded upon different mental attitudes.⁷⁹

77 *Gesta Tancredi in expeditione Hierosolymitana Auctore Radulfo Cadomenis*, in RHC HOcc 3:587–716, 629–30 (cap. 18).

78 It remains entirely unclear whether the two accounts are in any way connected. Both authors write quite some time after the events they describe, so it cannot be ruled out that both independently availed themselves of the same oral sources, which were then modified according to their respective intentions. But this is pure speculation.

79 On this issue, see also the observations of Magdalino, *History* (n. 10 above), esp. 168–75, where he is referring to Byzantine literature in general, and not specifically to historiography, to which, of course, his precepts also apply; see, too, the summary below.

4. Bon Mots and Sayings

In Byzantine historiographical sources, we often encounter small episodes, single sentences, or statements in which situations, events, or people are commented on in an exceedingly epigrammatic way, usually by one of the protagonists. It is debatable whether these episodes are genuine, or fabricated by either the respective author or his sources to lend a special note to the described occurrence or to characterize the specific individual.

Examples

Perhaps one of the most famous examples of such a bon mot, conveyed by Procopius, is a remark ascribed to Empress Theodora during the Nika riots, just as all appeared lost and Justinian was contemplating flight. Theodora emphatically refused to flee and declared: “May I never be separated from this purple, and may I not live the day on which those who meet me shall not address me as mistress. If, now, it is your wish to save yourself, O Emperor, there is no difficulty. For we have much money, and there is the sea, here the boats. However consider whether it will not come about after you have been saved, that you would gladly exchange that safety for death. For as for myself, I approve a certain ancient saying that royalty is a good burial-shroud.”⁸⁰ This saying was, indeed, most appropriate to the situation. It inspired Justinian with fresh courage and, shortly after, the situation improved and the riot was brutally suppressed. While previous scholarship has questioned the utterance of the saying itself, it has accepted that the empress did give a speech. The question remains, however, whether Theodora ever did employ such a bon mot, since it was not a new expression coined by the empress, but a well-known classical quotation. It was originally cited by Isocrates, who ascribed it to the tyrant Dionysios of Syracuse, remarking on the siege of Syracuse by the Carthaginians in 396 BCE, and which, in time, evolved into a famous adage quoted by other authors, including Diodorus and Plutarch.⁸¹ The

80 *Procopius in Six Volumes*, trans. H. B. Dewing, Loeb (London, 1914), 1:231–33; ἐμὲ γὰρ τις καὶ παλαιὸς ἀρέσκει λόγος, ὡς καλὸν ἐντάφιον ἢ βασιλεία ἐστὶ (J. Haury, *Procopii Caesariensis opera omnia*, rev. P. Wirth, 4 vols. [Leipzig, 1963], 1:130.14–16).

81 Isokrates, *Oration* 6.45; a survey of the entire issue, including extensive literature and sources, and the corresponding dispute, is now easily accessible in M. Meier, “Zur Funktion der Theodora-Rede

earlier references, however, were not to imperial reign (βασιλεία), but tyranny (τυραννίς). Procopius's readers are quite likely to have noticed the change in meaning. M. Meier argues that Procopius intended, with this modified adage, not only to demonstrate Theodora's resoluteness, but also to direct a veiled literary criticism at the reign of the imperial couple—one that the educated reader would have recognized and that accords well with Procopius's ambivalent opinion of Justinian and Theodora. One can therefore concur with Meier's conclusion that Procopius's entire account is largely an artificial literary product, with specific biases toward the persons involved, rather than an authentic record of actual events. Indeed, Procopius's stylizations go beyond even the practice typical for classical historiography.⁸²

The example of Procopius clearly demonstrates the problems inherent in bon mots. In general, they are bound to direct speech, where they can play a crucial role in briefly summarizing the speaker's—in this case, Theodora's—argument.⁸³ Direct speech, in any case, is largely regarded as a sphere in which a rhetorically trained author can take every liberty to insert his own opinion into a speaker's mouth, or to cause him to utter what to the author's mind should have been said in this situation. For the Byzantine audience, this method was standard practice.⁸⁴

It is nevertheless possible, of course, that situations did occur in which such a bon mot was actually uttered at the specific time and in the form cited. Recall, for example, the reign of Emperor Phokas in the early seventh century. Phokas was an uneducated subaltern officer, who was entirely unprepared for the emperorship, and consequently behaved at times like the proverbial bull in a china shop. After Maurice's deposition and his own coronation, Phokas publicly insulted the leader of the Blue circus faction, who called out to him: "Go away and learn the protocol, Maurice is not dead."⁸⁵

im Geschichtswerk Prokops (BP 1,24,33–37)." *Rheinisches Museum für Philologie* 147 (2004): 88–104, esp. 95–101, whose conclusions we concur with; on Procopius in general, see Karpozilos, *Historikoi* 1:369–419; Treadgold, *Early Historians* (n. 8 above), 176–226.

82 Meier, "Theodora-Rede," 95.

83 Another example of this kind of bon mot is the saying of Loukas Notaras (discussed in "Problems of Terminology"): "It is better to see the Turkish turban rule the city than the hat of a Latin."

84 On the problem of speeches, see below, Conclusions.

85 ὕπαγε, μάθε τὴν κατάστασιν· ὁ Μαυρίκιος οὐκ ἀπέθανεν (C. de Boor, *Theophylactus Simocatta, Historiae*, rev. P. Wirth [Stuttgart,

This jibe was not, as sometimes previously assumed, a threat to reinstate the deposed Maurice—although it appears to have been later interpreted as such, even in Byzantium⁸⁶—but rather a comment on how the uneducated Phokas should consult Maurice on the proper comportment of an emperor. One central duty of the speakers of the circus factions was to communicate with the emperor in the Hippodrome, to pass on questions and requests, and also occasionally to criticize him or his subjects. They were certainly trained in rhetoric and, thus, capable of delivering well-directed bon mots.

A little later, a similar saying, meant to deride the emperor, is transmitted by Theophanes. Phokas appeared at the emperor's *kathisma* obviously not entirely sober, so the speakers of the Greens called out to him: "Once again you have drunk from the cup! Once again you have lost your mind!"⁸⁷ The emperor was allegedly so incensed that he had many members of the Greens executed, which, according to the chronicler, triggered massive unrest in Constantinople. In this case, as well, we cannot entirely rule out that these words were uttered as cited. It could equally be, however, a defamation of Phokas. If the latter is the case, Theophanes is certainly not to blame, as he is known to have copied his sources verbatim; the defamation would derive from one of his sources, perhaps dating from the period of Herakleios. Another bon mot under suspicion of being a fabrication for its sheer succinctness is found within a dialogue between the victorious

1972], 8.10, p. 304.17). Verbatim, but with different punctuation: Theophanes, *Chronicle* 289.29–30; on Simokattes, see Karpozilos, *Historikoi* 1:475–510; Treadgold, *Early Historians*, 329–40; most recently S. Efthymiadis, "A Historian and His Tragic Hero: A Literary Reading of Theophylact Simokatta's *Ecumenical History*," in Macrides, *History as Literature* (n. 10 above), 169–85. Efthymiadis emphasizes that Simokattes wrote his history from a literary perspective, in which a concern for facts was secondary.

86 See the summary in Photios's *Bibliotheca*, which is, however, a greatly abridged version of the text and omits the order that Phokas learn the κατάστασις: Ἀπογραφὴ καὶ συναριθμησις τῶν ἀνεγνωσμένων ἡμῖν βιβλίων ὧν εἰς κεφαλαιωδὴ διάγνωσιν ὁ ἡγαπημένος ἡμῶν ἀδελφὸς Ταράσιος ἐξητήσατο (R. Henry, *Photius, Bibliothèque*, 8 vols., Collection Byzantine Budé [Paris, 1959–77; repr. in 9 vols., 1991]: 1:65, p. 97.13–15; Καὶ μνήμη Μαυρικίου ὡς οὐκ ἀπέθανε, καὶ διὰ τοῦτο τοῦ τυράννου πρὸς τὸν φόνον τοῦ βασιλέως μᾶλλον ὀργή).

87 Theophanes, *Chronicle* 296.26–27; trans. Scott and Mango, 426: πάλιν εἰς τὸν καῦκον ἔπιες· πάλιν τὸν νοῦν ἀπώλεσας·

Herakleios and Phokas, transmitted in the chronicle written by Patriarch Nikephoros. Herakleios asks Phokas, who had been captured by Herakleios's soldiers and who seemed in a pathetic condition: "Is it thus, O wretch, that you have governed the state?" Phokas retorts with some irony: "No doubt, you will govern it better."⁸⁸ The remark is found in the first part of the Nikephoros Chronicle, which in all probability derives from a source dating from before 642, and therefore most certainly echoes propaganda from Herakleios's reign. Herakleios's most urgent problem at the start of his reign was a lack of legitimacy, since neither was he related to Maurice, nor did he have any other claim to the imperial throne; nor can the first years of his rule be described as particularly successful. Quite the contrary. For this reason as well, Phokas was probably systematically defamed for the duration of Herakleios's reign. Not until his victory over the Persians was Herakleios celebrated as a highly successful emperor. The dialogue between Herakleios and Phokas would best fit in this period, since the reader of course knew that Herakleios had indeed been the more successful emperor. Here again, the historicity of this dialogue cannot be ruled out entirely.⁸⁹

One exception in the category of bon mots and sayings is found in the *Historia syntomos* by pseudo-Michael Psellos, which presents adages attributed to a large number of Byzantine emperors, usually arranged at the end of the respective emperor's portrayal. Certainly the author did not collect all these himself, because they are found in this concentration only for the emperors ruling between Tiberios II (578–582) and Philippikos (709–711). Sayings by emperors prior to that are cited, but are fewer in number, whereas adages attributed to later emperors remain the exception. Furthermore, these are not appended to the individual

portrait, but incorporated into the main text.⁹⁰ The author of the *Historia syntomos* clearly enjoyed these sayings, granting them extensive space in his otherwise brief biographies. For the period between the late sixth and early eighth century, he probably used, as noted above, a source containing a great number of these sayings. A last example will demonstrate, however, that these bon mots are divorced from historical reality. Emperor Justinian II is credited with the following: "Being emperor for the second time he prayed for a third and fourth time, for, he said: 'after rain comes sunshine.'"⁹¹ As a bon mot, the saying is surely excellent. However, that an emperor whose nose had been cut off at his first deposition should have prayed for a third and a fourth at his return to the throne—which body parts would be next?—must be relegated to the realm of fantasy. After being overthrown the second time, Justinian II also lost his life.

Conclusions

The examples discussed above should suffice to demonstrate how Byzantine chroniclers employed bon mots to briefly characterize individuals and summarize and encapsulate specific situations in a short sentence or saying. It was of no significance whether the quotation had actually been uttered, whether the author had modified it, or even invented it entirely. In the first example, Theodora's speech in Procopius, the author modified a generally known adage, with which Theodora herself was possibly familiar. Procopius's modification contained for the literary educated reader an indirect criticism of the imperial couple. For that reader it would have been entirely clear, however, that Theodora could never have uttered those words in this way. However, they did describe in a nutshell the empress's attitude in the Nika riots, while simultaneously characterizing her as well.

88 Nikephoros, *Chronography* 4.24–27 (de Boor); 1:36.41–43 (Mango); trans. Mango: ὃν ἰδὼν Ἡράκλειος ἔφη "οὕτως, ἄθλιε, τὴν πολιτείαν διώκησας;" ὁ δὲ "σὺ μᾶλλον" εἶπε "κάλλιον διοικεῖν μέλλεις." On this, see also below, Conclusions.

89 On Nikephoros's history, see the in-depth "Introduction" of Mango, *Nikephoros* (n. 27 above); in general, Karpozilos, *Historikoi* 2:61–88; on the division of the chronicle and date-span, see R.-J. Lilie, "Die zweihundertjährige Reform: Zu den Anfängen der Themenorganisation im 7. und 8. Jahrhundert," *BSI* 45 (1984): 27–39, 190–201, at 31; on the sayings discussed in this paper, see as well H.-G. Beck, *Geschichte der byzantinischen Volksliteratur*, Byzantinisches Handbuch 2.3 (= Handbuch der Altertumswissenschaft 12:2.3) (Munich, 1971), 25–28.

90 This is the case, for example, in the encounter between Theophilos and the poetess Kassia, in which she countered his remark "From a woman arose all evil" with "From woman emanated all better things." On Kassia, see most recently I. Rochow, *Kassia* (Athens, 2011) (an improved Modern Greek translation); pseudo-Michael Psellos, *Historia syntomos* 97, p. 86.46–47; on the *Historia syntomos* in general, see Karpozilos, *Historikoi* 3:155–85; PmbZ 2, Prolegomena: 15–16.

91 Pseudo-Michael Psellos, *Historia syntomos* 81, p. 72.89–90, trans. Aerts: Οὗτος δις βασιλεύσας ἤρχετο καὶ τρις καὶ τετράκις· ἡ δὲ γὰρ, φησι, μετὰ νέφος ὁ ἥλιος.

Bon mots of this kind could actually have been uttered, as the examples in Theophanes show. This was insignificant, however, for the bon mot's value. Entire collections of bon mots most likely existed, which were consulted and used at will. The *Historia syntomos* by pseudo-Michael Psellos is, however, unique, making conclusions regarding the prevalence and popularity of such collections impossible. Clarification is also needed as to why such a collection was consulted only for the emperors between Tiberios II and Philippikos Bardanes. Nevertheless, it demonstrates the freedom an author enjoyed to modify his sources,⁹² as is also evident in the dialogue between Herakleios and Phokas. In the *Historia syntomos*, Herakleios asks Phokas: "Was this your amateurish way, tyrant, of handling the empire?" Phokas answered this shamelessly: 'you may perhaps handle it more professionally?'"⁹³ The author, by substituting the comparatively neutral term ἄθλιος for the much more severe τύραννος and by characterizing Phokas's reign as ιδιωτικῶς, which the editor W. J. Aerts correctly translates as "amateurish," replaces the relatively reserved wording of Nikephoros's *Breviarium* with a coarser version; he also accentuates even more strongly the contrast between Phokas and Herakleios by having Phokas not just reply (ὁ δὲ εἶπε), but "shamelessly" (ὁ δὲ ἰταμῶς). The alteration of "state" (πολιτεία) to "empire" or "imperial rule" (βασιλεία) is not without significance in this context, since it denotes a change in the perception of governance. The quotation as such was, in any case, not inviolable for the author, who adopted it from his source, but could readily adjust it to his own requirements.

Bon mots could thus serve to characterize a person, as in the case of Justinian II, or to emphasize pointedly a more or less dramatic situation, as in the case of the Nika riots, which could thus be encapsulated in a bon mot. From this point of view, one could also categorize bon mots under "dramatization and sensationalism," as both could be concentrated to the extreme in a bon mot. In consequence, any question of the veracity of such a bon mot was of no relevance to either the author or the reader. In a subordinate sense the bon mot was "true," as long as it was employed at

the proper place and succinct enough to deserve its being remembered.

5. Epic Elements

Historiographical texts provide an absolutely perfect setting not only for epic allusions, but also for the adoption of entire episodes from the epic—or other—traditions. These additions could be linked to certain protagonists, who would thus be endowed with heroic qualities. They could also be founded on actual events that echoed earlier well-known heroic deeds, with which they could then be—directly or indirectly—compared. Such comparisons were easiest, of course, with direct combat, which enabled comparisons with previous wars known from literature. In Byzantine historiography, the Homeric epics offered such points of reference. But other classical historians were consulted as well—for example, Thukydides, Xenophon, or Flavius Josephus. Even though their works were not epics, they nevertheless provided opportunities for attributing epic/heroic qualities to the protagonist. The same was true for later sources, as shall be demonstrated below. The importance of the Old Testament, as well, should not be underestimated. We must differentiate between more-or-less verbatim adoptions of entire episodes and narratives that attempt to set a certain tone in their accounts by quoting—often anonymously—single words and partial sentences.⁹⁴

Direct adoptions

Entire episodes, which have been either slightly abridged or awkwardly fit into the narrative, are found in works primarily by authors who have largely compiled their own works from others, and thus either directly or indirectly absorbed this material. One of the best examples of this method is the *Chronicle* of Theophanes, which is based, to a great extent, on a collection of source material most likely gathered by Georgios Synkellos.⁹⁵ We shall confine ourselves to a

92 Or the freedom of those sources to modify theirs.

93 Pseudo-Michael Psellos, *Historia syntomos* 75, p. 62.18–20: ὁ Ἡράκλειος "οὕτω, τύραννε, τὴν βασιλείαν κατέστησας ιδιωτικῶς" ἔφη· ὁ δὲ ἰταμῶς "σὺ δὲ κάλλιον ἂν καταστήσεις."

94 Thus we will find correspondences to our discussion below, Anonymous Quotations.

95 On the sources of the *Chronicle* of Theophanes, see C. Mango, "Who Wrote the Chronicle of Theophanes?" *ZbFilozFak* 18 (1978): 9–17; most recently, R.-J. Lilie, *Byzanz unter Eirene und Konstantin VI. (780–802): Mit einem Kapitel über Leon IV. (775–780) von I. Rochow*, BBS 2 (Frankfurt, 1996), 315–422, for a discussion of the

single detailed example: the sons of the trumpeter and their actions in the 650s.⁹⁶ Theophanes writes:

In this year Mauias commanded that a great naval armament should be made with a view to his fleet's sailing against Constantinople. The entire preparation was being made at Tripolis in Phoenicia. On seeing this, two Christ-loving brothers, the sons of a trumpeter, who lived at Tripolis, were fired with a divine zeal and rushed to the city prison, where there was a multitude of Roman captives. They broke down the gates and, after liberating the captives, rushed to the emir of the city, whom they slew together with his suite and, having burnt all the equipment, sailed off to the Roman state. Even so, the preparation was not abandoned; and while Mauias made an expedition against Caesarea of Cappadocia, he appointed Aboulauar chief of the said shipbuilding. This man arrived at Phoenix (as it is called) in Lycia, where the emperor Constans lay with the Roman fleet, and engaged him in a sea battle. As the emperor was about to fight on sea, he saw in a dream that night that he was at Thessalonike. When he had awakened, he related his vision to an interpreter of dreams, who said, "Would, O emperor, that you had not fallen asleep or seen a dream: for your being at Thessalonike is interpreted as 'Give victory to another,' [that is,] victory will go to your enemy." Now the emperor, who had taken no measures to draw up his battle line, ordered the Roman fleet to fight. And when the two sides engaged, the Romans were defeated and the sea was dyed with Roman blood. The emperor then put his robes on another man; and the aforesaid trumpeter's son leapt into

the imperial ship and, snatching the emperor away, transferred him to another ship, thus saving him unexpectedly. This courageous man then stationed himself bravely on the imperial ship and killed many of the enemy before giving up his life on behalf of the emperor. The enemy surrounded him and held him in their midst, thinking he was the emperor; and, after he had slain many of them, they killed him, too, as the man who was wearing the imperial robes. Thus routed, the emperor escaped and, leaving everyone behind, sailed off to Constantinople.⁹⁷

It is conspicuous that neither the two brothers nor their father are named. The father is referred to only as a trumpeter (βουκινάτωρ), but beyond that has no further function in the story. The second brother is also mentioned only once, more or less incidentally, in the action in Tripolis. One gets the impression that Theophanes/Synkellos consulted a much more extensive—perhaps even oral—source that was condensed to a bare minimum. While an uprising might actually have occurred in Tripolis, with some of the protagonists escaping to Byzantine territory, its extent is certainly exaggerated; likewise, the episode in which one of the brothers saves the emperor in the sea battle off the coast of Mount Phoenix is an invention. Another argument for an unrealistic depiction of the sea battle is the emperor's alleged dream, forewarning him of the defeat.⁹⁸

Similar adoptions can be found elsewhere in Theophanes. Best known, perhaps, are the adventures the future Emperor Leo III experienced at the

many contributions on this topic of Paul Speck, which cannot all be cited here.

96 A similar example from the same period would be the adventures of the koubikoularios Andreas around the same date. For reasons of space, we must forgo a detailed description and analysis here. On Andreas, see PmbZ 1.1: Andreas (#353); on the episode mentioned, see R.-J. Lilie, "Theophanes and Al-Ṭabarī on the Arab Invasions of Byzantium," in *Al-Ṭabarī, A Medieval Muslim Historian and His Work*, ed. H. Kennedy, Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam 15 (Princeton, 2008), 219–36, esp. 230–32.

97 Theophanes, *Chronicle* 345.18–25, 346.7–17, trans. Scott and Mango, 482. Other sources: Elias Nisibenus, in *Fragmente syrischer und arabischer Historiker*, trans. F. Baethgen, Abh. für die Kunde d. Morgenlandes 8.3 (Leipzig, 1884), 108–15 (= E. W. Brooks, *Eliae Metropolitae Nisibeni opus chronologicum*, CSCO 63, Scriptores Syri 23 [Louvain, 1910], 67.14–19); A. A. Vasiliev, *Kitab al-Unvan, Histoire universelle écrite par Agapius (Mahboub) de Menbidj*, in PO 8.3 (1912): 399–54, 483–84; for additional sources see PmbZ 1.1: Bukinator (#1047A).

98 The author plays on the name Thessalonike (θεῖς ἄλλω νίκην = give victory to another); on this and other dreams in Theophanes, see G. T. Calofonos, "Dream Narratives in Historical Writing: Making Sense of History in Theophanes's *Chronographia*," in Macrides, *Historiography as Literature* (n. 8 above), 133–44; see also "The Supernatural" below.

beginning of his career. Allegedly, Justinian II dispatched the (at that time) spatharios Leo with a large sum of money to Alania, to incite strife between the Alanians and Abasgians. Because Justinian, however, secretly wanted Leo dead, he ordered his henchmen to steal the money Leo kept hidden, leaving Leo doomed, without money or any other financial resources. Nevertheless, Leo managed to assert himself and with skill and cunning tactics he successfully completed his mission and returned safely to Byzantium. The entire story is unconvincing, improbable from the very beginning: Leo, at the time, was only a spatharios, a very low rank. It would have been quite easy for Justinian II to eliminate him, instead of choosing such a convoluted scheme. The episode does, however, serve a specific contextual purpose: Leo III had begun his career, as Theophanes had described just before, under Justinian II. This was apparently common knowledge, which could not be denied or withheld. Justinian II was regarded, however, especially in his second reign (705–709), as a tyrant, whose deposition had been morally justified. The episode Theophanes inserts into his historical work had the purpose, in this context, to depict Leo as an adversary of Justinian, because Leo's dissociation from Justinian seemed to be necessary.⁹⁹

These heroic deeds of Leo III are most certainly not taken from his own epic, but possibly from a *Vita*—as yet unknown, of course—perhaps from an account of his deeds compiled before his coronation. The details of his ascension to the throne suggest an independent source that Theophanes adopted, at least in part.¹⁰⁰ Borrowings of this kind from other genres may be encountered frequently. One example in this context is the account, dating from the first half of the ninth century, about Manuel, *protostrator* and *magistros*, found in Theophanus continuatus, Genesisios, and Symeon the Logothete. As Juan Signes Codoñer convincingly argued some time ago, this account is

based on one, perhaps two, vitae of Manuel that these authors incorporated into their own works, although without being able to fully resolve the contradictions they contained.¹⁰¹

Insertions of entire episodes like these may be encountered frequently and, as previously remarked, are certainly not confined to the Chronicle of Theophanes or epics. We shall present one final example of this type that clearly reveals the author's double motivation. The princess Anna Komnene describes in her *Alexiad* the reception of members of the First Crusade in the imperial palace in Constantinople. During this audience the Crusaders swore oaths of fealty to the emperor, though one of them also dared to sit on the emperor's throne. He was reprimanded by one of the leaders, but responded only with grumbling. The emperor noticed the Frank's anger and spoke to him. Thereupon the Frank declared:

"I am a pure Frank," he replied, "and of noble birth. One thing I know: at a cross-roads in the country where I was born is an ancient shrine; to this anyone who wishes to engage in single combat goes, prepared to fight; there he prays to God for help and there he stays awaiting the man who will dare to answer his challenge. At that cross-roads I myself have spent time, waiting and longing for the man who would fight—but there was never one who dared." Hearing this the emperor said, "If you didn't get your fight then, when you looked for it, now you have a fine opportunity for many. But I strongly recommend you not to take up position in the rear of the army, nor in the van; stand in the centre with the hemilochitae. I know the enemy's methods. I've had long experience of the Turk." The advice was not given to him alone, but as they left he warned all the others of the manifold dangers they were likely to meet on the journey. He advised them not to pursue the

99 Theophanes, *Chronicle* 391–400.

100 The Arab sources also contain information on Leo's ascension, which would be based, however, on their own tradition; on Leo III see PmbZ 1.2: Leon III. (#4242); on the possible sources, see as well D. Afinogenov, "A Lost 8th Century Pamphlet Against Leon III and Constantine V?" *Eranos* 100 (2002): 1–17; idem, "The Story of the Patriarch Constantine II of Constantinople in Theophanes and George the Monk: Transformations of a Narrative," in Macrides, *Historiography as Literature*, 207–14.

101 J. Signes Codoñer, "Lust am Erzählen: Heiligenviten als Grundlage der Geschichtsschreibung im 10. Jahrhundert und der Weg nach Bagdad," in *L'écriture de la mémoire* (n. 10 above), 83–105; idem, "Dead or Alive? Manuel's (After)life after 838," in *Pour l'amour de Byzance: Ommage à Paolo Odorico*, ed. C. Gastgeber, C. Messis, D. I. Mureşan, and F. Ronconi, *Eastern and Central European Studies* 3 (Frankfurt, 2012), 231–42; on Manuel see also PmbZ 1.3: Manuel (#4707).

enemy too far, if God gave them the victory, lest falling into traps set by the Turkish leaders they should be massacred.¹⁰²

We shall not discuss this episode in any further detail, for its absurdity is evident. The claim that a Frank sat on the emperor's throne during an official audience is, in itself, wholly implausible. It fails for the simple reason that the emperor himself was seated there and that the throne would have been surrounded by servants and guards, so the Frank would not have had the slightest opportunity to take a seat there.¹⁰³ In a way, Anna Komnene confirms this herself, when she merely reprimands Baldwin, the leader of the Franks, stating it is not customary in Byzantium to be seated in the emperor's presence at an audience. Of seating oneself on the throne, which would have constituted an even greater breach of etiquette, there is no mention. But it is not Anna's objective to convey a factual account of the event, but rather to characterize by the Frank's behavior—in effect, an attack on the crown—the impertinent and arrogant attitude of the Franks.¹⁰⁴ It is interesting, however, that Anna Komnene is still not satisfied, and proceeds to insert an additional story in which the aforementioned Frank relates how it was impossible for him to fight duels in his home country. But this story is just as unrealistic—duels of that kind had long been banned in Latin Europe.¹⁰⁵ Single

combat of this kind did, however, play a prominent role in the courtly epic poetry, the *chansons de geste*, whose origins date back to the tenth century, becoming increasingly popular in Latin Europe from the eleventh century on. These poems were usually performed by minstrels and singers, and—originally, at least—were not preserved in written form.¹⁰⁶ From the second half of the eleventh century, with the increasing number of Latin mercenaries, pilgrims, and merchants, they seem to have arrived in Byzantium as well. Only later would the poems, or rather some of their themes, become incorporated into Byzantine literature,¹⁰⁷ which does not exclude the possibility that they may have been performed at the imperial court toward the end of the eleventh century, or that one could hear them at the Latin residences in Constantinople. Anna Komnene, in any case, adopted at least the core of a narrative of this kind, in order to characterize the Latins' general pugnacity, but also because such alien behavior would have been fascinating for an educated Byzantine, albeit in a negative way. The story, however, has absolutely nothing to do with what actually occurred in the throne room.

In this concrete case, the account serves the purpose of underscoring the superior composure of the emperor, who not only silently endures the insult, but even gives the self-proclaimed Frankish hero some advice for the battle against the Turks, which he of

102 Anna Komnene, *Alexiad* 10.10.74–10, trans. Sewter, 326; see Lilie, “Anna Komnene,” 91–92; see, as well, the pointer in Mullett, “Novelisation” (n. 15 above), 12; eadem, “Bohemond's Biceps” (n. 45 above).

103 Reinsch's opinion that this episode occurred just as Anna describes it must be rejected. See D. Reinsch, “De minimis non curat Anna?” *JÖB* 39 (1989): 129–33; see as well R.-J. Lilie, “Anna Komnene und die Lateiner,” *BSI* 54 (1993): 169–82, esp. 177 and 181. Reinsch argues that the throne was large enough to accommodate several people. Pictorial sources from the Komnenian period prove this was not the case.

104 This episode could therefore also be categorized as “Characterization by Deeds.”

105 These were not the official duels (trials by combat) that were still legal in France up to the fourteenth century—the last duel of this kind was fought in 1386 (see E. Jäger, *The Last Duel: A True Story of Crime, Scandal, and Trial by Combat in Medieval France* [New York, 2005])—but private single combat without witnesses and without set rules. Duels of this type were banned by both church and state since the tenth century. For this reason, all efforts to connect this episode to a particular location, as has been attempted in much prior scholarship, are entirely futile; see also Lilie, “Anna Komnene,” 91–92.

106 These were not, of course, texts in Latin, but were performed in the vernacular—here, Old French. Whether Anna learned of these songs, directly or indirectly, through contact with other Latins at court in Constantinople, can no longer be determined; in general, on *chansons de geste*, see D. Boutet, *Forme et signification d'une écriture épique du moyen âge* (Paris, 1993); F. Suard, *La chanson de geste*, Collection Que sais-je?, 2nd ed. (Paris, 2003); a still useful introduction is J. Bumke, *Höfische Kultur: Literatur und Gesellschaft im hohen Mittelalter*, 11th ed. (Munich, 2005). I would like to express my gratitude to Iver Brackert for his valuable advice on the topic of *chansons de geste*.

107 The chivalric romances, for example, adapted by the Byzantines from about the 12th century on; see, for example, C. Cupane, “Topica Romanzesca in Oriente e in Occidente: ‘Avanture’ e ‘Amour,’” in *Il Romanzo tra Cultura Latina e Cultura Bizantina*, ed. H.-G. Beck, F. Conca, and C. Cupane (Palermo, 1986), 47–72; see also R. Beaton, *The Medieval Greek Romance* (Cambridge, 1989), 15–18, with a brief discussion of 12th-century east-west literary contacts, which he appears to question—at least for the period before Manuel I Komnenos. The episode analyzed here, as far as I can determine, has not yet been included in this discussion.

course ignores. In the battle at Dorylaeum, in which the Crusaders, after initial losses, were victorious, this Frank proved how little his deeds corresponded to his vainglory: “That crazy idiot, Latinus, who had dared to seat himself on the imperial throne, forgetting the emperor’s advice stupidly rode out in front of the rest (he was on the extreme end of Bohemond’s line). Forty of his men were killed then and he himself was seriously wounded. He turned in flight and hurried back to the centre—visible proof, although he would not admit it in words, of Alexius’s wise counsel.”¹⁰⁸

This description, as well, cannot be correct. According to Anna’s own battle description, the Frank belonged to Bohemond’s unit, which had, however—again, according to Anna—not yet arrived at Constantinople at the time the audience she describes took place.¹⁰⁹ From Anna’s report it can be deduced the Frank was a member of one of the Lotharingian or northern French units that only later joined the battle at Dorylaeum, where Bohemond commanded the vanguard that commenced the battle without waiting for the other Crusaders. It seems, therefore, that Anna Komnene is here combining different elements into one single episode, with the intention of contrasting the insolence of the Latins to the judicious and exemplary comportment of the emperor, as well as of conveying a more dramatic portrayal of the situation by transposing and condensing the events. For her, the veracity of the various individual incidents described is of less significance.

Epic Elaboration of Specific Events

The ideal opportunity for inserting epic elements into a historiographical narrative is, of course, depictions of single combat and battles. Here, Homeric epic, but also the Old Testament, furnished a nearly inexhaustible treasure of models that could either be imitated directly or modified at will. Anemas, to name but one example, the son of the last Arab emir of Crete, was admitted to the Byzantine bodyguard after the Byzantine conquest of Crete in 960/61 and participated in John I Tzimiskes’ 971 campaign against the Rus. In a battle near Dorostolon, Anemas killed the Russian leader Ikmor according to Leo the Deacon’s account,

by severing both his head and right hand in one single blow. Ikmor was not only second-in-command of the Russians, but is described as giant and daring (ἀνὴρ γιγαντώδης καὶ νεανικός). Whether this description is generally valid for Russian leaders or must instead be regarded as a topos remains a matter of debate; the Russian leader Svenald, who had shortly before also been slain by a Byzantine in the very same conflict, is described in the exact same words.¹¹⁰ However, the association with Goliath slain by David in the Old Testament would certainly have been immediately recognizable to any Byzantine reader.

In fact, such engagements tend to follow a certain pattern: the hero challenges an essentially far-too-powerful opponent, appears at first to falter, only to ultimately prevail and decisively conquer the opponent. An absolutely perfect example of this method is demonstrated by the historian Niketas Choniates, in his portrayal of John II Komnenos’s 1137/38 expedition to Cilicia and against the Crusader principality of Antioch. Niketas describes the single combat between a Byzantine and an Armenian, in which the Byzantine champion wins in the end. The Armenian opponent had initially derided the Byzantines and challenged them. They chose one especially brave soldier, the Macedonian Eustratios. For quite some time, he remained on the defensive during the contest, but finally cut the Armenian’s shield into pieces with a single blow, although it seemed equal to Hector’s shield. Thereupon the Armenian fled. When the emperor asked why he had hesitated for so long, the Macedonian replied that he had actually intended to sever both the shield and the Armenian in two with a single blow, but was unable to do so because his opponent had held his shield too far from his body. The emperor richly rewarded him for his victory.¹¹¹

Whether or not this Eustratios truly existed can no longer be determined. Eustratios, in this context, is a “speaking name” (“the good soldier”), on the other hand it is not a rare name. The contest took place in Cilicia. The Byzantine reader was certainly aware that Alexander the Great achieved a great victory against the Persians in this region near Issus in

108 Anna Komnene, *Alexiad* 11.3.84–92; trans. Sewter, 341.

109 On the change in chronology of the events in Anna Komnene’s account, see Lilie, “Anna Komnene,” 51–56.

110 On Anemas, see Leo the Deacon, *History* 9.6, p. 149.2–12, and on Svenald, 9.2, p. 144.18–21; see as well PmbZ 2.1: Anemas (#20421), 2.3: Ikmor (#22753), and 2.6: Svenald (#27439).

111 Niketas Choniates, *History* 23.90–25.40.

333 BCE, alluded to by the reference to Eustratios as a Macedonian. Also, the comparison of the Armenian's shield to that of Hector fits into this overall picture, since Hector was not just any hero, but the main enemy of the Greeks at Troy. The entire description of this single combat is, therefore, full of associations of which the Byzantine reader was fully conscious. It still cannot be ruled out that the account is nevertheless factual, or at least has an authentic background. The arguments against authenticity are, however, relatively compelling.¹¹²

The extent to which Niketas Choniates plays with epic motifs and allusions such as these is manifest in his depiction of a tournament held by Emperor Manuel I Komnenos during his Syrian campaign in 1158 near Antioch:

Since the battle that bristles with long spears had tasted no blood, goodly numbers of both sides eagerly engaged one another, tilting lances and avoiding the thrusts aimed at them. It was something to behold during this mock battle in one place a knight thrown on his head and shoulders, and in another place one knocked off his saddle, and one lying on his face, and another on his back, and still another who turned tail in headlong flight. One knight, pale with fear, was frightened of his adversary with couched lance and wholly buried himself behind his shield while the other, observing his cowering foe, was exuberant. The rush of the wind whipped up by the horses' charges caused the pennons to wave and produced a shrill whistle. Viewing this embroilment one could have described it, and not inelegantly, by saying that it was like watching Aphrodite in union with Ares, or the Graces embracing Enyo. Thus, the games that day were a mixture of diverse noble deeds. Manuel roused the Romans to strive mightily, and, even more incredible, he wanted them to excel the Latins tilting with the lance. His eyes were the judge of the games played on the field for the ever high-spirited and insolent Italians could in no way tolerate the Romans prevailing in the tournament. The emperor

dashed two knights to the ground at the same time; brandishing his lance, he charged the one, and the force of the thrust threw both opponents down.¹¹³

At first glance, the depiction appears quite complex and conveys the impression that the chronicler had witnessed the event himself and endeavors to convey a vivid impression of what had transpired. However, Niketas could hardly have been able to participate in this campaign due to his age and, if he had, he would have mentioned it. Taking a closer look, it becomes evident that the author does not, in fact, relate any details, aside from the claim that Manuel dashed two knights off their horses with one blow from his lance.¹¹⁴ The other details are rhetorical embellishments of a collision of mounted troops, glorified to an outstanding spectacle by anonymous citations largely from the *Iliad*. How the tournament transpired exactly cannot be ascertained by this description either. In the Latin sources reporting on Manuel's campaign, it is not mentioned at all.

The depiction, in fact, fulfills a specific purpose for Niketas Choniates—or his source. It is meant to gloss over the fact that the campaign had been a failure. Manuel had not achieved his main goal—the conquest of Antioch—but had instead to be satisfied by a recognition of Byzantine sovereignty. This outcome was, in view of the great expense and effort, rather meager, and the stylization of the tournament as an honorable, “bloodless” battle indubitably served to distract from this poor result. This impression is further intensified when the author at the end of the episode underscores the manly courage (*ἀνδρεία*) of the emperor, who had, in fact, achieved nothing: “Now that he had filled the Antiochenes with admiration for his manly courage, and they had verified with their eyes what they had

112 See also Simpson and Efthymiadis, *Niketas Choniates* (n. 4 above), 38.

113 Niketas Choniates, *History* 109.72–110.91; trans. Magoulias, 62.

114 The emperor's clothing and that of Prince Raynald of Antioch are also described, but these could just as well be the usual “festive costume,” also quite familiar in Constantinople; on these events, see R.-J. Lilie, *Byzantium and the Crusader States 1096–1204*, trans. J. C. Morris and J. E. Ridings (Oxford, 1993), 181; on the tournament and its possible literary influence on a later, anonymous ekphrasis, see, as well, L. Jones and H. Maguire, “A Description of the Jousts of Manuel I Komnenos,” *BMGS* 26 (2002): 104–48, esp. 114–18, 136–39.

previously only heard with their ears, he changed his mind and decided to return to Constantinople.”¹¹⁵

Conclusions

Epic inclusions may serve different purposes, but they primarily illustrate and dramatize factual events—warfare, in particular. They may also serve to heroize the protagonist, either by comparing him to ancient heroes, or by stylizing his opponents as formidable combatants, so that the hero’s eventual victory appears all the more triumphant. This would have been of less significance for the author, however, than his objective to compose a more colorful and thrilling narrative with these additions and embellishments than a mere listing of events would have provided. It was not even necessary to incorporate entire sentences or episodes into the narrative; single sayings or the names of famous heroes—like Hector and Achilles, or David and Goliath—might suffice to evoke such associations.

One exception, perhaps, is the example, cited above, of the tournament organized by Emperor Manuel, where the anachronistic elements employed to embellish the narrative were clearly intended to disguise the failure—at least, according to its own expectations—of the entire campaign. Such questions can ultimately only be resolved individually for each specific case.

6. Problems of Terminology

Writers of history often adopt from their sources terms that had an originally different usage. It is difficult to determine conclusively whether or not these were conscious adaptations, since modern interpreters often have their own difficulties discerning differences in definitions of words or terminology.

Examples

Perhaps the best-known misinterpretation of a terminus technicus is found in the *Chronicle* of Theophanes, who reports that in the year 622/23 Emperor Herakleios proceeded “to the country of the themata” (ἐπὶ τὰς τῶν

θεμάτων χώρας) to drill his troops and to march with them against the Persians.¹¹⁶ In Theophanes’ lifetime, the term θέμα denoted a military district, and Theophanes, who had adopted the item from another source, was probably entirely unaware that the term “theme” had had a different meaning in the early seventh century than in his own time.¹¹⁷ Following Theophanes, scholars have surmised that this organizational system—the so-called “theme system”—was established by Herakleios to better motivate his troops for the war against the Persians.¹¹⁸ In fact, in the first half of the seventh century the term θέμα primarily designated a military unit. Herakleios, therefore, simply proceeded “to the region where the troops were [encamped],” which in context makes much more sense than the—for the first quarter of the seventh century—anachronistic interpretation of themata being military districts.¹¹⁹

In the case of Theophanes, it is a change in a word’s meaning that leads to an anachronistic interpretation of θέμα. Even more problematic are those cases in which the source is from another genre, and therefore employs terms having a technical meaning different from that which one would expect in a literary historical work. This transference of terms is quite evident, for example, in Anna Komnene: in her account

116 Theophanes, *Chronicle* 303.10; trans. Scott and Mango, 435.

117 On Theophanes’ difficulties with changing usages in some of his sources, see Scott, “Events” (n. 12 above), 58–61, with some literary examples.

118 One main advocate of this view was Ostrogorsky (n. 1 above), who lent it added authority by incorporating it into his handbook (*History*, 96–98 [= *Geschichte*, 80–83]); this view—with slight variations—is still maintained by a number of scholars today; see, for example, I. Shahīd, “Heraclius and the Theme System: New Light From the Arabic,” *Byzantion* 57 (1987): 391–406; idem, “Heraclius and the Theme System: Further Observations,” *Byzantion* 59 (1989): 208–43.

119 For thorough introductions to this topic, see J. Haldon, *State, Army and Society in Byzantium: Approaches to Military, Social and Administrative History: 6th–12th Centuries* (Norfolk, VA, 1995); idem, “Seventh-Century Continuities: The Ajnād and the ‘Thematic Myth,’” in *States, Resources, Armies*, ed. Av. Cameron, *The Byzantine and Islamic Near East 3, Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam 1* (Princeton, 1995), 379–423; R.-J. Lilie, “Araber und Themen: Zum Einfluß der arabischen Expansion auf die byzantinische Militärorganisation,” *ibid.* 425–60; these studies also provide extensive surveys of most of the earlier literature; on the evolution of the definition of “thema,” see J. Koder, “Zur Bedeutungsentwicklung des byzantinischen Terminus Thema,” *JÖB* 40 (1990): 155–65.

115 Niketas Choniates, *History*, 110.92–94; trans. Magoulas, 62–63; Kaldellis, “Paradox” (n. 18 above), 88–89, emphasizes the contrast between the glittering tournament and the losses Manuel’s army suffered against the Seljuqs on the way back to Constantinople. But for Kaldellis as well, it is evident that Niketas deliberately glorifies the tournament beyond what might be considered normal.

of the deeds of her father, one highlight is her record of the 1108 contract between Alexios I Komnenos and the Norman Bohemond. One of the terms of the treaty reads as follows: Τους δὲ προσερχομένους μοι ἀνθρώπους τῆς βασιλείας σου ὡς κατεξαναστάντας τοῦ κράτους τοῦ σου καὶ ἐμοὶ ἐκδουλεύειν ἐθέλοντας καὶ μισήσω καὶ ἀποπέμψομαι, μᾶλλον δὲ κατ' αὐτῶν ἐξοπλίσομαι. Τους δὲ ἄλλους [ed. Leib; Reinsch in his edition changes ἄλλους to ἄλλως] βαρβάρους ἐθέλοντας δὲ ὅμως ὑπὸ τὸ ἐμὸν δόρυ γίνεσθαι, δεξαίμην μὲν, ἀλλ' οὐκ ἰδίῳ προσώπῳ. "If men approach me who have rebelled against the authority of Your Majesty and wish to become my slaves, I shall express my loathing of them and reject them—more than that, I shall take up arms against them. As for the other barbarians who are yet willing to submit to my spear, I shall receive them, but not in my own name; on behalf of you and your much-loved son I shall compel them to take oaths, and I shall take over their lands in the name of your Majesties."

This text has been called into question by D. Reinsch, who argues that the wording implies that the emperor's ἀνθρωποι are also barbarians, which cannot be the intended meaning. Reinsch therefore follows the version in manuscript F and changes ἄλλους into ἄλλως, so that the passage reads: "Those, however, who incidentally are barbarians, but nevertheless wish to subjugate themselves to Bohemond. . . ." This argument, however, overlooks the fact that this is the Greek version of a bilingual contract, which is also full of technical terms in Latin. The term ἀνθρωποι therefore designates not only the normal subjects of the emperor, but also—corresponding to the Latin *homines*—his "men," that is, the Latin knights and possibly also the other barbarian mercenaries serving in the emperor's forces. In that case, the sentence in question retains the sense of Leib's version in the printed edition (vol. 3, p. 129): "Quant aux hommes-[liges] de votre Majesté." The sense is that Bohemond may not enlist the mercenaries of the emperor—that is, his *homines* or ἀνθρωποι—but is quite free to recruit any other barbarians, which designates here those Latin knights in the East not serving in the Byzantine army, or warriors of other nationalities. Even these he may not enlist in his own name, which surely means he may enlist them in the emperor's name. Thus they become, at least indirectly, Byzantine subjects.¹²⁰

120 Anna Komnene, *Alexiad* 13.12.96–6; trans. Sewter, 427; the text has been modified accordingly in Reinsch's edition; for

Words, however, may change their meaning without our being able to trace their transformations, basically for lack of sufficient data. One good example of the problems this entails is the famous and frequently cited quote of the *megas doux* Loukas Notaras just before the fall of Constantinople: "Κρεϊττότερόν ἐστιν εἰδέναι ἐν μέσῃ τῇ Πόλει φακιδόλιον βασιλεῦον Τούρκων ἢ καλύπτραν Λατινικήν," "It is better to see the Turkish turban rule the city than the Latin *kalyptra*."¹²¹

In most accounts, *kalyptra* was easily understood to be a type of clerical head covering and translated as miter, tiara, or monk's cap. This interpretation immediately suggests itself, since the sentence is found in a—broadly speaking—religious context. Recently, however, Reinsch has voiced doubts concerning this interpretation, stating that καλύπτρα must have specifically designated the Latin emperor's crown.¹²² While certain details of his argument may be debatable, Reinsch does present as proof a series of other citations taken from several sources, including Anna Komnene, Niketas Choniates, and our example from Loukas, which demonstrate that καλύπτρα can also mean "crown."

Was this, however, always the case? With regard to Michael Psellos, for example, who is not much older, linguistically speaking, than Anna Komnene, καλύπτρα does not designate a crown: in his eulogy for Abbot Nikolaos of the abbey Horaia Pege, Psellos relates a vision Nikolaos once had in which he saw the Mother of God lying on a daybed (κλίνη) and wearing a καλύπτρα: ἡ δὲ καλύπτρα τῆς κεφαλῆς καὶ τὰς ὀφρύας ἐκάλυπτε, τὸ πρόσωπον αὐτῆς ἡλιακῶν χαρίτων ἀπέστειλεν. If καλύπτρα meant crown here, this crown would have—astonishingly—slipped over the Mother of God's forehead, since, as Psellos writes, it covered

Reinsch's argument, see "Zum Text der Alexias Anna Komnenes," *JÖB* 40 (1990): 233–68, at 257, where he translates the passage into German accordingly: "Diejenigen hingegen, die im übrigen Barbaren sind, aber dennoch den Wunsch haben, sich Bohemond zu unterwerfen"; for the treaty of Devol, see *Regesten der Kaiserurkunden des Oströmischen Reiches von 565–1453*, ed. F. Dölger, pt. 2, *Regesten von 1025–1204*, Corpus der griechischen Urkunden des Mittelalters und der neueren Zeit 1 (Munich, 1995), no. 1243, with relevant literature.

121 V. Grecu, *Doukas, Istoria Turco-Bizantina (1341–1462)* (Bucharest, 1958), 329.

122 D. Reinsch, "Lieber den Turban als was? Bemerkungen zum Dictum des Lukas Notaras," in Panagiotakes, Jeffreys, and Angelou, *ΦΙΛΕΛΛΗΝ* (n. 19 above), 377–89.

her eyebrows! Here, the word indubitably means a veil, rather than a crown.¹²³

It is, in fact, in our opinion, highly problematic to definitively determine a definition on the basis of four or five examples of unequal significance extending over four hundred years. Reinsch's observations on Loukas Notaras are also not convincing: the μέγας δούξ may very well have been pragmatic, but this alone provides no evidence as to what precisely he may have meant. Reinsch assumes that while he may have rejected a Latin on the imperial throne, he was not necessarily opposed to a Union of the Churches. In the situation of 1453, however, these were not mutually exclusive alternatives! At this time—especially after the disastrous outcome of the Crusade of Varna 1444—there was no question of a secular rule by a Latin in Constantinople; not a single ruler in Latin Europe had the power or even the inclination to conquer Constantinople and reestablish a Latin Empire there. On the other hand, Emperor John VIII together with his patriarch consented to the Union of Churches at the Council of Ferrara/Florence in 1438/39. Proof that the Union did not exist on paper alone is their festive joint Mass, celebrated in the Hagia Sophia just before the Turkish conquest of the city. A verbal rejection of a secular ruler but an acceptance of the Union would have been absolutely nonsensical. So what did Loukas Notaras actually mean, assuming of course that the phrase was truly uttered in this way? To whom do we owe this narrative and what was the author's intention?

As so often, there are no decisive answers to these questions. One can, however, legitimately assume that the author was not referring to any specific form of rule, but instead used the phrase to illustrate the fundamental dilemma: to whom would Constantinople fall in 1453, the Turks or the Latins? Typically, for a Byzantine this could not be stated simply, but needed to be rhetorically embellished. Therefore, καλύπτρα probably does not designate a crown, a miter, or the like at all, but rather quite generally a head covering commonly worn by Latins, just as the turban was generally associated with Turks. The famous phrase probably means no more than: I would rather see the Turks rule over that

city than the Latins. There was no intention of defining any specific form of rule, be it ecclesiastical or secular. It was clear to the Byzantines, without further explanation, what the *bon mot* meant.

That the meanings of words may change over time is indisputable and not restricted to Byzantium. One final example is the word δούλος/δουλικός, which in classical usage denoted a slave, whereas in the middle Byzantine period it took on the more moderate meaning of “servant,” “subordinate” or “subject,” or “servile.” Thus, the Byzantine commander Petros, for example, was referred to by the chronicler Skylitzes as Emperor Nikephoros II Phokas's δούλος.¹²⁴ A seal dating from the ninth century depicts a certain Konstantinos as “doulos and curator” of the Hagia Sophia, which certainly does not imply slavery.¹²⁵ And when the Bulgarian Archon of Belgrade subjugates himself, together with other archons, to Emperor Basileios II μετὰ δουλικού τοῦ σχήματος that does not make him into a slave, but means that he is approaching the conqueror with a subservient bearing.¹²⁶ However, the meaning “slave” is still encountered contemporaneously, necessitating an analysis of each individual case to interpret the term correctly.¹²⁷

Conclusions

Byzantine historiographers do not generally specify the precise sense of the terms they use. Rather, they employ terms routinely, so to speak, without further reflection or, for that matter, without informing readers of potential changes of meaning a word may have undergone. It is doubtful that the author would even have been aware of these changes over time. Theophanes, for example, copied his sources verbatim, without making any

123 Ἐγκώμιον εἰς τινὰ Νικόλαον μοναχὸν γενόμενον καθηγούμενον τῆς ἐν τῷ Ὀλύμπῳ μονῆς τῆς Ὠραίας Πηγῆς, ed. P. Gautier, in *Byzantina* 6 (1974): 33–69, at 56.654–55. (This passage was not considered by Reinsch in his analysis.)

124 Skylitzes, *Synopsis* 272.79–81; on Petros, see PmbZ 2.5: Petros (#26496).

125 G. Zacos and A. Vegler, *Byzantine Lead Seals*, vol. 1 (Glückstadt, 1972), no. 1807: Κωνσταντίνῳ δούλῳ τῆς Μεγάλης Ἐκκλησίας καὶ κουράτορι. See PmbZ 1.2: Konstantinos (#3964).

126 Skylitzes, *Synopsis* 364.68–73; see PmbZ 2.2: Elemagos (#21634).

127 In the two sections of the PmbZ, there are a little over thirty examples for δούλος; “slave” is found in more than fifty lemmata; one must keep in mind, as the difference in number indicates, that there are other designations for “slave”; see also G. Prinzing, “On Slaves and Slavery,” in *The Byzantine World*, ed. P. Stephenson (London–New York, 2010), 92–102; I would like to express my gratitude to Günter Prinzing for alerting me to this, as well as for other suggestions and corrections.

adjustments to his own usage. This practice can lead to misinterpretations, as our examples demonstrate.¹²⁸ In Anna Komnene, on the other hand, we find the verbatim transcription of the text of a treaty, which does not correspond to the author's own style, yet is also neither explained nor commented on by her. The linguistic criteria applied by the editor Reinsch are, therefore, in this context inappropriate and even lead to an incorrect reconstruction of the text.

It cannot, then, be ruled out that in many cases several meanings coexisted for one word or term, without it being possible to determine which meaning is appropriate in the given case. In view of these reservations, one can ultimately only come to the conclusion that it is frequently difficult to assign definite meanings to specific words or terms without first carefully analyzing whether this word belongs to the respective author's "normal" vocabulary, whether the definitive meaning can be derived from this vocabulary, or in which context of meaning it is employed. If this is not the case, one should be cautious in voicing one's own interpretations.¹²⁹

7. The Supernatural

In the everyday life of the Byzantines, belief in the supernatural appears to have been of central significance. Byzantine historiographical works present repeated references to the supernatural, which occur primarily in settings in which wicked deeds provoke punishment, but also by frequent references to good and bad omens and prophecies, and to direct divine intervention, be it immediate or via saints or angels. This emphasis upon the divine is, of course, attributable to the corresponding convictions of the authors. We should keep in mind, however, that the protagonists themselves had similar beliefs or considered such

things possible; thus, for example, an emperor would be dependent on appropriate omens at the beginning of a military campaign.¹³⁰

Examples

Most popular were prophecies, which had the advantage of being judged *ex eventu*—and were thus always right, whether proven true or not. The fates of emperors or of usurpers striving for the imperial throne were especially the subject of prophecy. Leaving aside Basil I, whose grandson seems to have literally collected prophecies on his grandfather's accession to the throne,¹³¹ our examples are many: Philippikos Bardanes was supposedly protected from the sun by an eagle while sleeping, whereupon a monk prophesied his accession to the throne, which of course occurred.¹³² Two hundred years later, in contrast, a Byzantine astrologer, who had fled to the Syrian Caliphate, predicted the rebellion and death of Constantine Doukas in the year 913.¹³³ The prophecy of Nikephoros II Phokas's deposition is a bit more complicated: it was prophesied to him that he would be overthrown after conquering Antioch, and he therefore forbade the seizure of the city. When the commanders Michael Bourtzes and Petros took Antioch anyway, they were disgraced and recalled from their posts, whereupon they participated in John Tzimiskes' plot overthrowing Nikephoros II, so that the prophecy proved true.¹³⁴

130 See, in particular, P. Magdalino, *L'Orthodoxie des astrologues: La science entre le dogme et la divination à Byzance (VII^e–XIV^e siècle)*, *Réalités Byzantines* 12 (Paris, 2006); idem, *The Occult Sciences in Byzantium* (Geneva, 2006).

131 The corresponding book (5) in Theoph. cont. was, in all likelihood, at least cowritten by Basil's grandson Constantine VII; on the prophecies, see G. Moravcsik, "Sagen und Legenden über Kaiser Basileios I.," *DOP* 15 (1961): 59–126.

132 Theophanes, *Chronicle* 372.7–11; for additional sources, see PmbZ 1.3: Philippikos (#6150). This motif is not confined to Philippikos, but emerges already in the fifth century in connection with Marcian and is later used again by Basil I; see Scott, "From Propaganda to History to Literature" (n. 32 above) 116; idem, "Text and Context in Byzantine Historiography," in *A Companion to Byzantium*, ed. L. James (Chichester, 2010), 251–62, esp. 256–59.

133 Theoph. cont. 6.3, pp. 383.19–384.3; for additional sources, see PmbZ 2.3: Konstantinos Dukas (#23817); 2.5: Nikolaos (#25944).

134 Skylitzes, *Synopsis* 272.79–273.36; Zonaras, *Epitome* 16.26, pp. 508.13–510.14; see PmbZ 2.4: Michael Bourtzes (#25253); 2.5: Petros (#26496).

128 This does not rule out that he may have, on occasion, altered and rearranged his sources, to conform to his own conceptions, as Roger Scott has demonstrated in several articles, with particular emphasis on accounts of the history of the sixth century; see, for example, Scott, "Events."

129 On the problems connected with changes in meaning, see also M. Hinterberger, "Envy and Nemesis in the *Vita Basilii* and Leo the Deacon: Literary Mimesis or Something More?" in Macrides, *Historiography as Literature* (n. 8 above), 187–203 (on the basis of many examples taken from Theoph. cont. and Leo the Deacon).

A similar prophecy related to Leo VI, who was injured in an assassination attempt on 11 May 903 during a procession in the church of St. Mokios. The emperor not only broke off that year's procession, but abolished the Mokios procession for good, whereupon the wise monk and *oikonomos* of the St. Mokios church, Markos, prophesied that he would reign for only ten more years. Leo VI died exactly ten years later on 11 May 913.¹³⁵

That chroniclers had an ambivalent attitude toward prophecies is evident from an account of Emperor Manuel I Komnenos by Niketas Choniates: Niketas reports that in 1143 Manuel, on his way back to Constantinople from Cilicia, where he had already been acclaimed emperor, passed through Chonai. Here the archbishop Niketas, famous for his prophecies, predicted that he would attain the imperial throne and would live a few years longer than his grandfather Alexios I. Toward the end of his life, however, he would go insane. Niketas Choniates claimed to have known of this prophecy, and everyone asked themselves how this insanity would manifest itself. The truth of the prophecy was finally proven when Manuel made theological demands contradicting the teachings of the Church Fathers: "everyone agreed that this was the fulfillment of the prophecy because this doctrine, being wholly the opposite of the truth, was truly and absolutely the worst kind of madness."¹³⁶ It is apparent that Niketas Choniates considered this prophecy to be correct. He entertained no doubts. Only a few lines later, however, he vehemently denounces another prophecy awarding the emperor fourteen more years of life: "Those most baneful charlatans of astrology who urged the emperor to spend his leisure time in sexual pleasures boldly told him that he would soon recover from his illness and shamelessly predicted that he would level alien cities to the ground."¹³⁷ Since Manuel died in 1180, as correctly prophesied by Niketas of Chonai, the later prophecies were therefore false and the seers proven to be frauds.

135 Theoph. cont. 6.19, pp. 365.21–366.9; Skylitzes, *Synopsis* 181.35–182.45; Symeon log. 133.264–74; Georg. mon. cont. 862.3–13; for additional sources, see PmbZ 2.4: Markos (#24995).

136 Niketas Choniates, *History* 219.94–220.9; trans. Magoulas, 124; on Niketas's attitude toward astrology, prophecy, etc. see P. Magdalino, "Prophecy and Divination in the *History*," in Simpson and Efthymiadis, *Niketas Choniates* (n. 4 above), 59–74.

137 Niketas Choniates, *History* 220.23–27; trans. Magoulas, 124; Magdalino, "Prophecy," 60.

Such predictions did not apply to emperors alone, but also to society or the empire in general. According to Leo the Deacon, a comet appearing during Emperor John I Tzimiskes' reign had prophesied not only his impending death, but also the ensuing civil war. The death of the *parakoimomenos* Basil Lakapenos was also heralded by a comet.¹³⁸ Comets seem to have been regarded in general as harbingers of calamity, as many authors frequently state.

Supernatural events play a prominent role on other occasions as well. The fall of Syracuse in 878 is supposed to have been announced by demons living by Monembasia, who had informed the admiral of the—delayed—relief fleet, and their information had been later confirmed by refugees.¹³⁹

The belief in supernatural forces is also illustrated by another episode in Theophanes continuatus: Astronomer John advised Emperor Romanos I Lakapenos to have the head of a statue standing on the Xerolophos in Constantinople knocked off. In the very same hour, the Bulgar ruler Symeon would die. Romanos followed the advice, and Symeon did indeed die that very same hour.¹⁴⁰

In addition to prophecies—which are so numerous it would be redundant to present further examples—other episodes demonstrate, at least indirectly, the Byzantines' belief in predetermination and fate. Again, we cite only a few examples: Theophanes attributed the—real—conquest of the city of Pergamon in 715/16 to the entirely indefensible behavior of its inhabitants: "Now Masalmas came to Pergamon, which he besieged and, by God's dispensation, captured because of the Devil's machinations. For, at the instigation of a magician, the inhabitants of the city produced a pregnant woman who was about to give birth and cut her up. And after removing her infant and cooking it in a pot, all those who were intending to fight dipped the

138 Leo the Deacon, *History* 10.6, pp. 168.19–169.13; 10.8, p. 172.14–17; Skylitzes, *Synopsis* 311.84–88; see W. G. Brokkaar, "Basil Lacapenus: Byzantium in the Tenth Century," *Studia Byzantina et Neohellenica Neerlandica* 3 (1972): 199–234, esp. 233.

139 Theoph. cont. 5.70, pp. 309.21–312.11; 240.1–242.32; Skylitzes, *Synopsis* 158.34–160.65; with slight variations in Genesios, *Reigns of the Emperors* 4.33, pp. 82.58–83.92, where a messenger was supposedly informed by demons; see PmbZ 2.1: Adrianos (#20122).

140 Theoph. cont. 6.21, pp. 411.17–412.2; Skylitzes, *Synopsis* 222.1–11; pseudo-Symeon 740.4–10; Zonaras, *Epitome* 16.18, p. 473.7–15; see PmbZ 2.3: Ioannes (#22941).

sleeve of their right arm in this detestable sacrifice, and for this reason they were delivered to the enemy.” This story is not, as previously assumed, factual, but is rather the adaptation of an apocalyptic text used by the author of one of Theophanes’s sources, to explain the fall of Pergamon by the immoral behavior of its inhabitants. Whether or not Theophanes recognized the fictitious nature of this narrative can no longer be ascertained.¹⁴¹

The reason given for the fall of Pergamon is clearly the sins of its inhabitants, whereby the author—or his source—draws upon a motif from the Apocalypse. “Moral” explanations such as these, whether with or without reference to Holy Scripture, are frequent—indeed, they may be encountered in any disaster or defeat, so further examples are superfluous. Conversely, victories could also be attributed to supernatural support. At the victory over the Rhos in 971, for example, St. Theodore Stratelates is supposed to have been seen riding a white horse. At the same time, a nun in Constantinople saw the Mother of God in a dream, as she was giving the saint the command to hurry to John I Tzimiskes’ assistance.¹⁴²

Reading descriptions of “supernatural” occurrences of this kind today, we tend to banish them to the realm of fables and dismiss the account as unreliable. We must not forget, however, that the chroniclers not only believed in or invented stories of this kind for their own reasons, but that Byzantine society was itself superstitious. Thus, it was not unusual for an emperor to behave in the manner described in another episode related by Niketas Choniates, which is, of course, greatly problematic for yet another reason:

Those most baneful charlatans of astrology . . . foretold the movements of the universe, the convergences and conjunctions of the largest stars, and the eruption of violent winds; they

very nearly predicted the transformation of the entire universe, showing themselves to be oracular ventriloquists rather than astrologers. Not only did they reckon the number of years and months and count the weeks until these things would take place and clearly point them out to the emperor but they also designated the exact day and anticipated the very moment as though they had precise knowledge of those things which the Father had put in his own power and concerning which the Savior censured his inquisitive disciples. The emperor sought caves and hollows as protection against the winds and prepared for habitation; he removed the glass from the imperial buildings so that they should not be damaged by the blasts of the winds while his attendants, kinsmen, and sycophants also anxiously involved themselves in these undertakings, with some burrowing into the earth like ants and others making tents, fastening them with threefold cords and cutting sharp pegs to serve as supports.¹⁴³

This prophecy truly did exist, and at the time circulated not only in Byzantium, but in the entire East, and later in Latin Europe as well, where it became known as the “Letter from Toledo” and underwent numerous later “new editions.”¹⁴⁴ Though the prophecy was popular, its dating is problematic: the prophecy states precisely the year 1497 according to the Seleucid calendar, which corresponds to the year 1186 CE. This is undisputed. Niketas, however, unmistakably attributes the prophecy to Emperor Manuel I, who died in 1180. If this ascription were correct, then Manuel would have taken the abovementioned precautions at least six years before the prophesied catastrophe, along with his servants and retainers. This seems highly unlikely, since, for example, the removal of windows would have greatly diminished the quality of life in the palace, and

141 Theophanes, *Chronicle* 390.26–391.2; trans. Scott and Mango 541; dependent on Theophanes: Γεωργίου τοῦ Κεδρηνοῦ σύννοψις ἱστοριῶν, ed. I. Bekker, *Georgius Cedrenus Ioannis Scylitzae ope*, 2 vols. (Bonn, 1838–39), 1:788.3–8; parallel to Theophanes, but dependent on the same source is Nikephoros, *Chronography* 52.27–53.9 (de Boor), 53.4–9 (Mango); see W. Brandes, “Apokalyptisches in Pergamon,” *BSI* 48 (1987): 1–11; see, as well, PmbZ 1.5: Anonyma (#10008).

142 Leo the Deacon, *History* 9, pp. 153.22–154.22; the author qualifies this narrative, at least in part, by stating this “was said”: λέγεται δὲ καὶ τινα λευκόπῳλον ἀνδρα φανῆναι. . . .

143 Niketas Choniates, *History* 220.27–221.43; trans. Magoulias, 124–25.

144 On this prophecy, see G. de Callatay, “La grande conjonction de 1186,” in *Occident et Proche-Orient: contacts scientifiques au temps des Croisades*, ed. A. Draclants, A. Tihon, and B. van den Abeele (Turnhout, 2000), 369–84; D. Weltecke, “Die Konjunktion der Planeten im September 1186: Zum Ursprung einer globalen Katastrophenangst,” *Saeculum* 54 (2003): 179–212; Magdalino, *L’Orthodoxie des astrologues*, 110.

the great length of time before the actual catastrophe is ridiculous. If such an event actually did occur, it is more likely attributable to Emperor Isaac II Angelos, who reigned from 1185. But why did Niketas redate the episode to Manuel's reign?

One probable answer is that Manuel was known for his avid belief in astrology, which Niketas heavily censures, not just in this context. The emperor even defends astrology in a treatise in which he likens the study of astrological conditions to those of the human body, thus equating astrology with medicine.¹⁴⁵ Isaac II Angelos was also extremely superstitious.¹⁴⁶ Niketas had enough negative things to relate about him, without having to add further incidents. This particular example was much more effective applied to Manuel, whom Niketas both praises and criticizes. One can therefore regard it as another example of the ease with which Byzantine historiographers rearranged specific facts, even attributing them to other persons, in order to achieve a greater effect. Niketas closes the passage significantly enough by claiming that shortly before his death Manuel abandoned at the patriarch's recommendation his previous belief in astrology, and even set this down in writing.¹⁴⁷

Niketas may well be exaggerating here, yet there is no doubt that the Byzantines not only believed in prophecies, but would at times also orient themselves accordingly. In other words, we cannot rule out that such accounts are at least partially accurate. In the episode cited above, for example, regarding Nikephoros II Phokas and the taking of Antioch, there might well have been a prophecy linking the seizure of Antioch and the possible deposition of the emperor; in this scenario, Nikephoros would have believed the prophecy and therefore dismissed the two commanders. Other reasons are more plausible, however: the author might have heard a rumor that was circulating and inserted it into his account to explain the (to him) incomprehensible

dismissal; nor can it be ruled out that he deemed such prophecies possible.

Manuel I Komnenos supposedly failed to make provisions for his succession, because it had been prophesied that he would reign another fourteen years.¹⁴⁸ He was not the only one: while on his deathbed, "several monks" had prophesied to his grandfather Alexios I that he would not die until he had made it to Jerusalem and prayed at Christ's Tomb. The emperor is reported to have believed this.¹⁴⁹

Nevertheless, in certain cases suspicion is evident: after John I Tzimiskes' accession in 969, a marble plaque was found in the garden of a senator engraved with the emperor's name and that of his wife Theodora. Some considered this a miracle, others believed it was an attempt by the owner of the property on which the plaque had been unearthed to ingratiate himself with the emperor. John Skylitzes, who preserved the anecdote, could not—or would not—say which of the two versions was correct.¹⁵⁰

The decisive issue, which cannot be stressed enough, is that the Byzantines very strongly believed in supernatural manifestations, which they would also read into anything and everything. Very popular were cryptic numbers and letter puzzles. According to Niketas Choniates, Manuel I reigned for thirty-eight years, which according to Niketas had been predetermined by an oracle that had declared that the last syllable of his name would determine his end, because η and λ formed the number thirty-eight.¹⁵¹

Something similar even applied to the reign of the entire Komnenian dynasty, which necessarily had to come to a bloody end with Alexios II Komnenos, because the first letters of the names of the first four emperors spelled the word $\alpha\iota\mu\alpha$ (blood).¹⁵²

145 For information on the manuscript tradition of the treatise, see Magdalino, *L'Orthodoxie des astrologues*, 113–14, with n. 32; on the treatise's content, see idem, 114–28.

146 On this in detail, see Magdalino, "Prophecy," 61–73.

147 Niketas Choniates, *History* 221.50–51. Oddly enough, in contrast to this, Niketas proceeds to write about many other prophecies and omens, which he considers, at least in part, to be true, as in the case of those discussed; Magdalino, *L'Orthodoxie des astrologues*, 110–11, does not doubt the reliability of what Niketas recounts.

148 Niketas Choniates, *History* 220.313–18; see Magdalino, "Prophecy," 60–61.

149 Zonaras, *Epitome* 18.28, p. 760.8–18; this is not just one of the usual prophecies, but a reference to apocalyptic beliefs, according to which the last "messianic" emperor will conquer Jerusalem and die there; see Magdalino, "Prophecy," 68–70 (with additional literature).

150 Skylitzes, *Synopsis* 303.63–73; see PmbZ 2.7: Anonymus (#31550).

151 Niketas Choniates, *History* 222.66–70; see Magdalino, "Prophecy," 60, 74.

152 Niketas Choniates, *History* 169.95–3.

Conclusions

The examples cited—and they could be many times multiplied—decisively demonstrate that superstition, in the broadest sense, determined to a great extent both the Byzantines' everyday life as well as their high politics. One final testimony to this widespread general attitude is the *Historia syntomos* by pseudo-Psellos, attributing to Emperor Herakleios the saying that those who have no use for astrology refuse to read God's letters (τὰ τοῦ θεοῦ γράμματα). This comparison goes well beyond the equation made by Manuel I Komnenos in the twelfth century between astrology and medicine mentioned above.¹⁵³

The perspective of an educated Byzantine toward supernatural manifestations may be described as one of cautious skepticism. While sorcery was the work of the devil, perhaps it did sometimes work. Niketas Choniates manifests this attitude on the occasion of the actual charges of sorcery brought against the proto-strator Alexios Axouch: "So that the emperor's wrongdoing and disgraceful conduct should not appear to be inexcusable and premeditated, calumniators were secretly induced to accuse Alexios of using his powers of witchcraft against the emperor, powers which were so illusory and efficacious that the sorcerer could fly in the air and remain invisible to those upon whom he wished to swoop down with sword in hand; their other buffooneries and vulgarities to which sound ears ought not to listen were such of those of which the Hellenes, fabricating fables, accused Perseus."¹⁵⁴

The references to prophecies and good or bad omens, and the ensuing actions and events in the chronicles, are certainly to be questioned in each case. These references are not necessarily false, however, because they do reflect the common attitude of Byzantine society toward supernatural phenomena, which of course finds expression in the historical works. For this reason, even in these accounts a true core can often be

detected. This is also the case with the supernatural manifestations themselves, which we today would banish to the realm of fables or interpret as psychological or emotional instability, although subjectively real for the individual. Even cases of mass hallucination—such as the saint seen by many to come to the aid of his own in battle—cannot be dismissed entirely, as modern studies of contemporary phenomena have proven. One can therefore assume that the Byzantine chroniclers, when describing these manifestations, were convinced they were portraying reality.

8. "Timeless" Episodes

"Timeless" episodes are those insertions that actually have nothing to do with the events described. These are, to a certain extent, interchangeable, haphazardly inserted, and assigned to particular persons without, however, having any connection to them. These episodes can be an author's random adoptions from sources of any kind, as well as his own inventions.

Examples

The ninth-century chronicler George the Monk wrote a history of the world, which reaches up to the 840s. In the course of his account, George the Monk relates the following anecdote that is supposed to have transpired in Patriarch Germanos's reign, between 715 and 730: at this time, a wealthy man lived in Constantinople who was, on the one hand, philanthropic and a friend of the poor, but on the other hand practiced the vice of *porneia*, fornication. Eventually he died, and a discussion ensued between the patriarch and several eminent bishops about what had happened to this wealthy but licentious benefactor. The general opinion was that he had gone to heaven, until finally a famous ascetic spoke up. He told the patriarch and all those present that he had seen in a vision paradise and Hell, and this man stood exactly in between—because of his charity he belonged in Heaven, because of his *porneia* in Hell. Thereupon all those who heard this were greatly afraid and enjoined each other to observe a moral lifestyle.¹⁵⁵

153 Pseudo-Michael Psellos, *Historia syntomos* 76, 80–81, p. 66: Ἡράκλειος τῇ ἀστρονομίᾳ προσκείμενος ἔλεγε τοὺς μὴ ἐθέλοντας ἀστρολογεῖν μὴ βούλεσθαι ἀναγιγνώσκειν τὰ τοῦ θεοῦ γράμματα. ("Heraclius occupied himself intensively with astronomy and used to say that those who had no use for astrology refused to read God's letters" [trans. Aerts, 67]). It should be kept in mind, however, that the sayings collected in the *Historia syntomos* do not necessarily derive from actual sources, but were instead intended to entertain the audience with highly fitting aphorisms; see above on "Bon Mots."

154 Niketas Choniates, *History* 144.77–83; trans. Magoulias, 82.

155 C. de Boor, with corrections by P. Wirth, *Georgii Monachi Chronicon*, vol. 2 (Stuttgart, 1978), 746.7–748.17; on George the Monk, see H. Hunger, *Die hochsprachliche profane Literatur der Byzantiner*, 2 vols., Byzantinisches Handbuch Teil 5.1.2 (= Handbuch der Altertumswissenschaften 12.5.1.2) (Munich, 1978), 1:347–51; Kazhdan, *Literature* 2:43–52; Karpozilos, *Historikoi*

Indubitably this is a nice story with an appropriate moral point. It was, however, neither written by George the Monk, nor did it occur during Germanos's reign. Rather, it is a fairly widespread morality tale probably dating from the first half of the seventh century. One of the earliest versions takes place on Cyprus, another in Alexandria. There the hero is not anonymous, but is named Philentolos. The anecdote is also found in John Moschos's *Pratum spirituale* and was even translated into Latin. The reason for George the Monk's attribution of this morality tale to Patriarch Germanos of all people is unclear. He had absolutely nothing to do with it. On the other hand, he was the last pre-iconoclastic patriarch and was regarded as a saint, so perhaps George the Monk felt compelled to enrich the patriarch's biography with this anecdote and make it more vivid. Still, he is not even indirectly involved in the story. It is not he who provides the solution, but an anonymous ascetic, who is never mentioned again in George the Monk's chronicle.¹⁵⁶

An even better example of this literary method, which is particularly conspicuous in George the Monk's work, is illustrated by the following tale: during the reign of Emperor Leo IV (775–780), a man going on a walk with his dog was attacked and killed by a robber. The dog stayed with the dead man until another came by, saw the dead man, and buried him. Thereupon the dog followed him home. This man happened to be an innkeeper by profession and ran a tavern, where the dog then lived. Time passed, guests came and went, and one day—one can guess what happens next—the murderer entered the tavern. The dog pounced on him, barking and biting until he had everyone's attention, and finally the culprit confessed and received the penalty he deserved.¹⁵⁷

This is again clearly a nice anecdote, though it has no connection with Emperor Leo IV. George the Monk's reason for attributing it to his reign is unclear.

2:213–249; PmbZ 1, Prolegomena: 2.4; most recently, Théologitis, “*La Forza del Destino*” (n. 20 above), 181–219, esp. 196–218.

156 On Philentolos, see PmbZ 1.3: Philentolos (#6147), which also notes additional sources; on the insertions, in particular, see J. N. Ljubarskij, “George the Monk as Short Story Writer,” *JÖB* 44 (1994): 255–64, with several further examples; we concur with Ljubarskij's conclusions on George the Monk's method, especially the chronological randomness of these “short stories”; on the “historical value” of his narrative, see as well PmbZ 1, Prolegomena: 2.4.

157 George the Monk, *Chronicle* 765.15–766.11.

One interesting aspect of George the Monk's historiographical work is its broad distribution in Byzantium; it was also copied by later authors, including George Kedrenos, an eleventh-/twelfth-century historian. Kedrenos is generally considered uninteresting, unimaginative, and dependent on his sources. He was, as it were, a typically dry historian. Kedrenos also adopts this episode from George the Monk, relating it almost verbatim, although with a surprising alteration. He does not place it in the reign of Leo IV, but dates it one hundred years earlier, to the period before the Sixth Ecumenical Council of Constantinople 680/81.¹⁵⁸

This is a very intriguing observation! Why does Kedrenos change his source? It cannot have been by accident, because George the Monk does not relate the anecdote until much later. Nor can it be a lack of other noteworthy information, as the reign of Constantine IV (668–685) was crowded with historical events to recount: the Arab attacks, the war with the Bulgars, the Council of 680/81, and so forth. The only reason imaginable is that Kedrenos felt the need to enliven his purely factual historical account with a moral anecdote. While reading George the Monk, he must have recognized that the episode described was unhistorical, and that one could therefore insert it at whim and, if needed, even transfer it to another location. That is precisely what he did.

The two episodes discussed here can be designated as neutral and timeless. They neither give evidence to the historical personalities they name—Germanos or Leo IV, for example—nor do they directly or indirectly comment on other events discussed by the author. In addition there was, of course, the material the authors would employ to achieve certain effects or to characterize a person. The legends about Emperor Theophilos's sense of justice belong to this category, which are just as unhistorical as the examples discussed above. Several sources relate, for example, that Petronas, a brother-in-law of the emperor, illegally overshadowed the house of a widow with his own. The widow complained to

158 I. Bekker, *Georgius Cedrenus Ioannis Scylitzae*, 2 vols. (Bonn, 1838–39), 1:769.11–770.2; on Kedrenos, see Hunger, *Hochsprachliche Literatur* 1:393; Karpozilos, *Historikoi* 3:331–55; R. Maisano, “Note su Giorgio Cedreno e la tradizione storiografica bizantina,” *RSBS* 3 (1983): 227–48, esp. 242–44 (on Kedrenos's method of compilation, in general); PmbZ 1, Prolegomena: 2.4–25; for additional sources, see PmbZ 1.5: Anonymus (#11097).

the emperor, who recompensed the widow and had Petronas flogged.¹⁵⁹ This story can only be dismissed as entirely absurd: Petronas was the empress's brother and he held high positions at the court of Theophilos and of his successor Michael III, as well as in the army. Further, there is no indication that he ever fell out of favor with Theophilos. Of similar status is an episode in which a *strategos* is said to have illegally seized a soldier's horse, which led to the soldier's death in a military campaign. The horse was then given to the emperor as a gift, who used it for a ride around Constantinople. The soldier's widow pushed her way to the front, grabbed the reins, and complained to the emperor, who launched an investigation that proved the general guilty. On the emperor's command, he was banished, his fortune confiscated and given to the widow and her sons.¹⁶⁰ The tale reappears, slightly modified, in the works of other chroniclers of the period, where it is the soldier himself who protests to the emperor, who has the *strategos* flogged. The horse is given back to the soldier, who waives it for a large sum of money and is later killed in a military campaign.¹⁶¹ This episode combines the emperor's devotion to justice with criticism of the cupidity of the soldier, who greedily renounces his vital horse and is, in consequence, slain by the enemy.

Another belonging to this category is the tale in which the emperor notices a rich merchant ship from his palace window and inquires to whom it belongs. When he learns that it belongs to the empress, he orders the ship burned, since it is unworthy of an emperor—and of an empress as well—to be involved in trade.¹⁶²

Common to all three episodes is their timelessness. They could just as well take place in any era and in any circumstance, and primarily serve to illustrate Theophilos's love for justice and his exalted conception

of imperial dignity. They could therefore also be assigned to the category of "characterization by deeds."¹⁶³

A special type of this "timeless" material is the scholarly insertion, serving to explicate or provide background for an incident, a location, or a person. In Theophanes continuatus we find, on the occasion of the Arab attack on Thessalonike in 904, a historical-geographical description of the Aegean Sea, which has no connection whatsoever with Leo of Tripolis's naval campaign nor with his pursuer Himerios. The sole purpose of this description was the desire of the author—more likely, in this case, a later scholiast—to demonstrate his own erudition.¹⁶⁴ Scholarly insertions of this kind are especially frequent in Theophanes continuatus.

Conclusions

"Timeless" episodes are used in nearly every historiographical narrative, for example, in comparisons with other events and eras. In general, such material is employed by the author to establish either a direct or indirect correlation between the events and serves as explanation or indirect commentary. In George the Monk's case, the inserted episodes probably served to enliven the subject matter, even if primarily intended for moral edification. Episodes of this type belonged to a basic stock of Byzantine literary material, which was generally acknowledged as having nothing to do with actual, "real" history. Every author could, therefore, freely tap into this reservoir with a clear

163 A similar tale is also encountered in the Πάτρια Κωνσταντινουπόλεως, in T. Preger, *Scriptores originum Constantinopolitanarum* (Leipzig, 1907; repr. Leipzig, 1989), 3:28. There it is the ship of a widow, from whom it was illegally seized. The culprit is convicted and burned at the stake. This story, in turn, derives from a source dating from the fourth century, which is copied verbatim; on this see A. Berger, *Untersuchungen zu den Patria Konstantinupoleos*, Poikila Byzantina 8 (Bonn, 1988), 449–51. The timelessness of such exempla is evident.

164 Theoph. cont. 6.20/21, pp. 367.4–368.20; on the insertion, see A. Markopoulos, "Encore les Rhôs-Dromitai et le Pseudo-Syméon," *JÖB* 23 (1974): 89–99, who dates this geographical list of place names to Antiquity ("juste avant Jules César"); similarly, A. Karpozelos, "Οι Ρῶς-Δρομίται καὶ ὁ μῦθος τῆς ἐκστρατείας τοῦ Ὀλέγ," *Dodone* 12 (1983): 329–46, at 334–36; see, as well, PmbZ 2.4: Leon von Tripolis (#24397) and 2.2: Himerios (#22624). Some scholars still consider this description as factual and have attempted to reconstruct the naval campaign of 904 according to the order of the narration; see, for example, S. Tougher, *The Reign of Leo VI (886–912). Politics and People* (Leiden-New York-Cologne, 1997), 187, with n. 136.

159 Georg. mon. cont. 793.17–794.11; on the persons involved, see PmbZ 1.3: Petronas (#5929); 1.5: Anonyma (#10089), with additional sources.

160 Theoph. cont. 3.7, pp. 92.18–94.18; see PmbZ 1.5: Anonymus (#11829).

161 Symeon log. 130.31, pp. 225.204–226.225; Georg. mon. cont. 803.22–804.16; pseudo-Symeon 637.23–638.8.

162 Theoph. cont. 3:4, pp. 88.10–89.14; Genesios, *Reigns of the Emperors* 3.20, p. 53.87–4; Skylitzes *Synopsis* 51.46–66; Ps.-Symeon 628.3–7; Zonaras, *Epitome* 15.25, pp. 357.7–358.6; see PmbZ 1.4: Theophilos (#8167); Theodora (#7286).

conscience. The example cited from Kedrenos clearly demonstrates how he simply redates the anecdote borrowed from George the Monk and inserts it into a different section of his history. Audiences must surely have been aware of this practice and had no objection to being entertained in this way. Quite to the contrary: they apparently appreciated this approach. Since both George the Monk and Kedrenos aimed to fulfill these expectations, they readily inserted anecdotes of this kind into their narratives. George the Monk, whom modern scholarship tends to hold in low regard, certainly hit the mark of his readership's taste. The great popularity of his history in Byzantium is confirmed by the large number of extant manuscripts, in contrast to those of many other Byzantine historians more highly esteemed today.¹⁶⁵

We must draw a distinction between “timeless” and scholarly insertions—for example, the description of the Aegean Sea in Theophanes continuatus—which were presumably added to the text by a later reader. They are explanatory comments providing additional background information on the events portrayed. For us, it is ultimately of no significance if the author wished to demonstrate his own erudition or to instruct the reader.

Similar are attempts to characterize a protagonist by inserting “timeless” episodes. In these cases, an author could draw on more or less known material from sources or write his own, a difference that cannot always be discerned. The material serves a specific purpose in a particular case, yet could just as easily be attributed to another person. Some episodes of this type can therefore also be assigned to the category of “characterization by deeds,” where readers were also aware that the deeds described were not necessarily factual.

9. Anonymous Quotations

One of the most common literary stylistic techniques employed by Byzantine authors—and other medieval writers as well—is the quotation, primarily from the Old or New Testament, as well as from Christian and

non-Christian classical authors. Homer was popular, of course, especially in battle scenes, but most every “classical” author available was cited.¹⁶⁶ Quotations were rarely marked as such, since the author assumed that the educated reader would recognize them, and the concept of intellectual property as we understand it today did not exist. These unattributed quotations could consist in specific words and sentences, but also in the adoption of a narrative's content and themes. They belong, therefore, within the overall context of the mimesis of classical or early Byzantine works that were part of the standard repertoire of a literary educated Byzantine author. Some authors appear to have esteemed quotations highly. One could say they were the icing on the cake of the entire account.

Examples

One especially well-known example may be found in Procopius's account of the great plague of 541/42, in which he draws liberally from Thukydides' account of the plague during the Peloponnesian War. Procopius's borrowings do not necessarily lead to a misrepresentation of the sixth-century plague, as both authors describe the disease's manifestations quite differently. The overall impression engendered by the adopted phrases, however, is clearly of Procopius's mimesis of Thukydides. For Procopius, Thukydides was the natural model, since he endeavored to write the history of the great wars of his time, inviting imitation for that reason alone. Nevertheless, we cannot deny that these quotations make an assessment of the accuracy and originality of Procopius's account rather more difficult; do Procopius's borrowings convey a false image of the events of his own period?¹⁶⁷ Perhaps even more

166 There are thus close correspondences between this category and the “Epic Elements” discussed above.

167 Procopius, *De bellis* 2.22–23; Thukydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* 2.47–53; on the plague of 541/42, see most recently M. Maier, “Von Prokop zu Gregor von Tours: Kultur- und mentalitätengeschichtlich relevante Folgen der ‘Pest’ im 6. Jahrhundert,” in *Gesundheit – Krankheit: Kulturtransfer medizinischen Wissens von der Spätantike bis in die Frühe Neuzeit*, ed. K.-P. Jankrift and F. Steger (Cologne–Weimar–Vienna, 2004), 19–40; idem, “Prokop, Agathias, die Pest und das ‘Ende’ der antiken Historiographie: Naturkatastrophen und Geschichtsschreibung in der ausgehenden Spätantike,” *HZ* 278 (2004): 281–310; idem, “Hinzu kam auch noch die Pest. . .: Die sogenannte Justinianische Pest und ihre Folgen,” in *Pest–Die Geschichte eines Menschheitstraumas*, ed. M. Meier (Stuttgart, 2005), 86–107, at

165 This observation holds true for a number of authors that cannot be discussed here, for reasons of space; see, for example, Procopius, Agathias, Nikephoros Bryennios, Anna Komnene, Constantine Manasses, to name just a few. Some examples may be found in Scott, “Text and Context” (n. 132 above), esp. 252–59.

notable than the method of Procopius—who, at least, cited a widely read author—is the early thirteenth-century example of Niketas Choniates, who describes the siege of the city of Didymoteichon by the Bulgarians shortly after the Fourth Crusade in 1205 or 1206. The description is exceedingly lively. Niketas relates how the Bulgarians attacked, how they built siege engines, brought them into position, and deployed them against the fortifications. The defense forces nevertheless did not despair, but continued to fight bravely with all they had against the attacks, and were in the end victorious. The Bulgarians were forced to retreat without taking Didymoteichon.¹⁶⁸

The description appears convincing, even though it remains—despite the details—rather typical for such siege scenarios. A great number of passages, however, were not written by Niketas at all, but borrowed from Flavius Josephus's *Jewish War* in the first century CE. As Alexander Kazhdan demonstrated some time ago, Niketas excerpts—in part verbatim, in part with modification—the description of the siege of Jodapatha by the Romans and integrates it into his description of the siege of Didymoteichon.¹⁶⁹

Nowhere does Niketas make any reference to Flavius Josephus's account. The description of the siege of Didymoteichon fits seamlessly and logically into the main narrative. The quotation is not marked as such, though that alone is not necessarily problematic. Anonymous quotations can serve several purposes: as a type of additional explanation by reference to a similar work; as literary overstatement, immediately

recognizable; as an author's commentary on the events described.¹⁷⁰

The description of the siege of Didymoteichon is different, however. There are no terms or names immediately signaling a literary reminiscence, rather the quotation is virtually disguised, recognizable only to someone highly educated, which even within the Byzantine intelligentsia pertained to only a very few. Whoever was able to identify this quotation was one of them, and most likely relished the feeling of being able to understand allusions of this type. Those who were not able were of no significance.¹⁷¹

Another consequence is that whoever recognized this anonymous quotation must also have realized that Niketas's portrayal of the siege of Didymoteichon was not a factual account, but had been defamiliarized with these quotations. The story had thus—at least in part—lost its quality of being an authentic report.¹⁷² The reader who did not identify the quotation ultimately accepted a false account. No author ignores his audience. Therefore, when Niketas employs quotations as a literary device, he must have relied on the approval of his target audience.¹⁷³ We might finally conclude that the literary defamiliarization of the historical events had, in this particular case, greater

396–400. In a similar manner and much later, John Kantakouzenos adopted Thucydides in his description of the great plague of the mid-14th century, but he also modified and adapted his predecessor to the circumstances of his own time; see H. Hunger, “Thucydides bei Johannes Kantakouzenos: Beobachtungen zur Mimesis,” *JÖB* 25 (1976): 181–93; most recently, D. Reinsch, “Byzantine Adaptations of Thucydides,” in *Brill's Companion to Thucydides*, ed. A. Rengakos and A. Tsakmakis (Leiden and Boston, 2006), 755–78, esp. 775–76.

168 Niketas Choniates, *History* 631.17–633.51.

169 A. Pelletier, *Flavius Josephus, Guerre des Juifs*, vols. 2 and 3 (Paris, 1980), 3:141–43; see A. Kazhdan, “Looking Back to Antiquity: Three Notes,” *GRBS* 24 (1983): 375–77; on the Flavius Josephus tradition in the Middle Ages, see H. Schrekenberg, *Die Flavius-Josephus-Tradition in Antike und Mittelalter*, Arbeiten zur Literatur und Geschichte des Hellenistischen Judentums 5 (Leiden, 1972); idem, *Rezeptionsgeschichtliche und textkritische Untersuchungen zu Flavius Josephus*, Arbeiten zur Literatur und Geschichte des Hellenistischen Judentums 10 (Leiden, 1977).

170 One example of this type of defamiliarization is Niketas's depiction of the tournament (see above, in “Epic Elements”), which contains quotations from Homer, easily recognizable by their references to the ancient gods.

171 Niketas Choniates's citation method is not confined to Flavius Josephus, but includes other authors as well, such as Diodorus, Plutarch, and authors of the Second Sophistic; see Simpson, “Workshop” (n. 20 above), passim; G. Fatouros, “Die Autoren der Zweiten Sophistik im Geschichtswerk des Niketas Choniates,” *JÖB* 29 (1980): 165–86; Niketas's special relationship to Flavius Josephus may be based on the circumstance that both wrote shortly after the loss of their respective metropoleis: Flavius Josephus after the fall of Jerusalem in 71 and Niketas after that of Constantinople in 1204; see Simpson, “Workshop,” 263–64.

172 In contrast to the theory argued here, Scott posits that the copying of earlier texts might be an indication of the authenticity of the events portrayed; see “Text and Context,” 254–55 (“Truth by Plagiarism in Chronicles”).

173 See B. Croke, “Uncovering Byzantium's Historiographical Audience,” in Macrides, *History as Literature*, 25–53, who describes the audience for Byzantine historiographers as “a small highly educated and self-contained cultural elite around the court and government at Constantinople. . . . Historical writers worked within the literary tastes and expectations of their audience, which differed considerably from a modern one” (53).

priority for Niketas—and for his readers—than the factual representation. According to our present concept of historical writing, whoever appreciated Niketas primarily for his literary style would forfeit him as a reliable historian—a historian by today's definition, that is.

A quotation need not involve the verbatim adoption of a source, but might serve to evoke a recollection of a widely known text. One example of this method is found in John Skylitzes' account of Bardas Skleros's exile to Baghdad after his failed usurpation attempt in 979. According to Skylitzes, the ruler of Baghdad, Šamšāmaddawla, whom Skylitzes calls Chosroes, was engaged in civil war with the Persians, who were under the command of a certain Inargos. Against the Persians, Chosroes requested the assistance of Bardas Skleros, who demanded that all Romans be freed and turned over to him:

When Chosroes agreed to this, the prisons were quickly opened and the Romans in them set free; three thousand men were assembled from those prisons. After he had sent them to the baths and purged them of the filth of confinement, Skleros clothed them with new garments and raiment, arming each man in an appropriate and adequate manner. Then he engaged guides to show them the way and out they went against the Persians. When a formal battle took place and Skleros' men repeatedly and violently charged the Persians, these were perplexed by the strange nature of their armament, the unusual sound of their speech, their previously unknown battle order and, most of all, by the violence and speed with which they charged. Thus the Persians were roundly put to flight and every man of them fell. There was not even a messenger left (so the saying goes) to report the disaster. Inaros [recte Inargos] himself fell in the fray. The Romans collected a great amount of booty and many horses, then decided not to go back to Chosroes again but to take the road leading to Roman lands. They pressed the pace and succeeded in evading detection until they arrived safely in their homeland.

Skylitzes does not content himself with this account, but adds a variation: "According to another account,

Chosroes accorded them a generous reception as they returned from the victory against the Persians and, some time later, when the end of his life was approaching, he urged his son and namesake (who reigned after him) to make a treaty with the Romans and send them home. By one of these means Skleros regained Roman territory . . ." He leaves it up to the reader to decide which of the two accounts is accurate.¹⁷⁴

Both accounts are contrary to the known facts, which are confirmed as well by the contract between Šamšāmaddawla and Bardas Skleros preserved in Arab sources. According to this contract, Bardas Skleros remained in Baghdad until his release in 986, and was in no way involved in the civil war between Šamšāmaddawla and his enemies. Skylitzes' account is indisputably a literary reminiscence of the famous, and also well-known in Byzantium, *Anabasis* of Xenophon, describing the retreat of the ten thousand Greek mercenaries back to the Black Sea, after the Persian prince Cyrus, whom the Greeks had supported, was killed in battle. This impression is further reinforced by Skylitzes' reference to the subjects of Šamšāmaddawla as Achaemenids. In this way, Skylitzes establishes a correlation with Xenophon's account, but also alludes, by using the Persian name Chosroes for Šamšāmaddawla, to the Byzantine-Persian conflicts of the sixth/seventh centuries, in which the Sasanian Great Kings Chosroes I and Chosroes II were the main enemies of the Byzantine Empire. The account bears no resemblance to the actual historical situation of the 970s and 980s.¹⁷⁵

A similar, albeit much briefer, allusion to a well-known text is contained in Theophanes' account of Herakleios's battles against the Persians, in which he has the emperor slay a giant Persian in single combat. The Byzantine reader would easily recognize the allusion to David and Goliath. We know from other sources that

174 Skylitzes, *Synopsis* 332.75–334.39; trans. Wortley, 316–17; following him Michael Psellos, *Chronographia* 1.11, p. 20, 22; Zonaras, *Epitome* 17.6, pp. 550.9–551.15.

175 On the events, see A. Beihammer, "Der harte Sturz des Bardas Skleros: Eine Fallstudie zu zwischenstaatlicher Kommunikation und Konfliktführung in der byzantinisch-arabischen Diplomatie des 10. Jahrhunderts," *RHM* 45 (2003): 21–57; see, most recently, PmbZ 2.1: Bardas Skleros (#20785); 2.5: Šamšāmaddawla (#26976); on Skylitzes, see as well Karpozilos, *Historikoi* 3:239–30; PmbZ 1, Prolegomena: 17; PmbZ 2, Prolegomena: 14–15.

King David was Herakleios's ideal and he made frequent reference to him.¹⁷⁶

Conclusions

Attempting to recognize anonymous quotations poses technical difficulties, especially when those citations are indirect. The initial problem is to determine whether or not a text even contains anonymous quotations. To do so with a certain amount of accuracy, one must determine the author's exact educational background, or that of his source. In principle, this is possible, since we are fairly well informed about the basics of Byzantine education. In certain cases, however, problems arise because we are unfamiliar with the specific authors or passages. Quotations from Homer, the Old or New Testament, or even Thukydides or Herodotos are relatively easy to trace. But who is so familiar with authors of the Second Sophistic, with Cassius Dio, or with Flavius Josephus, for that matter, that he is able to identify borrowings without difficulty? Authors of the Second Sophistic are found, as we mentioned, in Niketas Choniates, but also in other authors: Cassius Dio, for example, was excerpted by John Zonaras. But some sources familiar to a Byzantine "intellectual," directly or indirectly—through florilegia for instance—are either partially or entirely lost. In addition, a modern reader is unable to identify such quotations, primarily because many authors once belonging to the Byzantine curriculum are no longer part of his cultural heritage, not even for specialists in Byzantine studies. Thus, when encountering these quotations they often go unrecognized. Perhaps computer-assisted analyses, of the sort that have emerged in the last few years, could be of assistance; the electronic *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* and other projects of this kind come to mind. But even then, one must first of all know how and what to ask to get the correct answers.

Furthermore, not even the Byzantines would have had direct firsthand knowledge of earlier works. They

drew in part from florilegia—we recall, for example, Photios's *Bibliothēke*—many of which have not survived. We must therefore acknowledge the possibility of quotations from works no longer preserved and thus unidentifiable, even with the most sophisticated computer program. Finally, the works we know may not be those that every Byzantine knew.

The much more fundamental issue, however, is the Byzantine author's attitude to his work. What value did the described event have for the author, when he could essentially modify it at whim and thus—at least according to our standards of historical writing—falsify it?

But we must again qualify this statement: quotation is not always equivalent to falsification. While Procopius may borrow many phrases from Thukydides, his description of the symptoms of plague, for example, is entirely original. The purpose of the borrowing—if we assume Procopius did indeed have deliberate intentions and if we do not automatically dismiss the quotations as "rhetoric"—was to convey the monstrosity of this epidemic. Since Thukydides was known to every educated Byzantine—like Goethe for the educated middle-class German and Shakespeare for the English in the twentieth century—his "classic" plague description was the standard by which later authors would be judged. Likewise, Niketas Choniates did not falsify the outcome of the siege of Didymoteichon; in contrast to the defenders of Jodapatha, they were victorious. Niketas's aim, in this particular case, was to transcend the usual, that is, stereotypical, battle-scene description. He could have quoted Homer, but that appeared for his intentions—to address the "erudite" reader—perhaps too simple, since most readers would have easily recognized a Homeric citation, which was probably not the case with Flavius Josephus. The quotations, moreover, do not contain any particular outstanding facts, but rather depict ordinary combat, which becomes more literarily sophisticated by means of a borrowing from a classical work. But where does that end? Could the Byzantine reader really always judge whether the author was pursuing literary goals with these quotations, revamping an excessively "simple" incident with rhetoric, or whether the quotations were inspired by incidents in the events described? Niketas did not help his reader with this decision; on the contrary, his cryptic anonymous quotations were exceedingly difficult for readers to identify. This interpretative difficulty may have been literarily interesting and amusing for both the author

176 Theophanes, *Chronicle* 314.1–6; the enemy is referred to as ἀνὴρ δὲ γιγαντιαῖος. May it suffice to mention in this context that Herakleios named one of his sons David, a singular occurrence in the history of the Byzantine emperors; see PmbZ 1.1: David (#12.41). As coemperor, this David was then renamed Tiberios; on the use of David in the typology of Byzantine emperors, see V. Tsamakda, "König David als Typus des byzantinischen Kaisers," in *Byzanz—das Römerreich im Mittelalter*, pt. 1, *Welt der Ideen, Welt der Dinge*, ed. F. Daim and J. Drauschke (Mainz, 2010), 23–54, esp. 30–33 on Herakleios.

and his audience. But what does this type of writing style have to do with historical writing as it is understood today? The issue becomes even more pressing in the example of Bardas Skleros, in which the echoing of Xenophon's *Anabasis* had no relation whatsoever with the actual events of 986. The imitation is here merely an end in itself and a literary game, which does not contribute any further insight into the events described.

Results and Consequences

Before proceeding with a comparative summary of the examples and categories introduced above, it is necessary to stress once again that the selection of these examples is by no means comprehensive and quite subjective in nature. Other colleagues would most likely find other examples and perhaps draw other conclusions as well. One should also keep in mind that the categories presented here generally apply to several authors, but with different degrees of applicability. In order to assess each individual author we would need to analyze him individually and comprehensively, ideally in the form of a commentary that addresses the questions that we are considering. This is a task that cannot be accomplished within the scope of this article and that would exceed the expertise of any individual scholar. The goal here, as mentioned earlier, is rather to attempt to propose criteria and make other suggestions as to how such a commentary might be conceived.¹⁷⁷

Of less significance, in our opinion, is the issue of the role of chronological developments and supposedly different subgenres. Often in Byzantine studies a distinction is made between chronography and historiography, whereby most chronicles date from between the sixth and the ninth century. Insofar as this distinction applies to the respective chronological extent of the works and their level of style, this distinction between chronography and historiography is certainly justified.¹⁷⁸ But the authors' fundamental

conceptions of the function and significance of historical narrative are more similar than has been realized. One should keep in mind that a classical education was most prevalent among the members of the relatively small upper class, but would have been passed on—indirectly and certainly in varying degrees—to the rest of the populace, insofar as they could read and write. Here, an outstanding role was played by rhetorical training, which in Byzantium was not regarded merely as a technique confined to a small group of an educated elite but was, rather, a methodology and mental attitude as well, part of the general literary and cultural heritage.¹⁷⁹ It goes without saying that Byzantine historiography changed over the centuries. There are outstanding differences between the works of authors like Theophanes or George the Monk, on the one hand, and Anna Komnene or Niketas Choniates, on the other, that cannot be explained by different levels of education alone. J. Ljubarskij rightly underscores developments in Byzantine historiography in the tenth century, just as there are without doubt vast differences between the historiographical writing of late antiquity and of the "Dark Ages."¹⁸⁰ One may, however, observe continuous distinctive features recurring in almost all authors, although, as previously noted, in varying forms and degrees. These idiosyncrasies allow us, in our opinion, to draw conclusions not only about the self-perception of Byzantine historians but also about the concept of "truth" that may be found in their works. Did they perceive historical writing as a science,

179 See the various contributions in the volume *Byzantium and the Classical Tradition, Thirteenth Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies 1979*, ed. M. Mullett and R. Scott (Birmingham, 1981), in particular, the sections "Definitions of the Classical Tradition" and "The Classical Tradition in Byzantium"; see as well *Rhetoric in Byzantium, Papers from the Thirty-Fifth Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies, University of Oxford 2001*, ed. E. Jeffreys (Farnham, 2001); most recently, E. Jeffreys, "Rhetoric in Byzantium," in *A Companion to Greek Rhetoric*, ed. I. Worthington (London, 2007), 166–83.

180 J. N. Ljubarskij, "Problema Voljucii Vizantijskoj Istoriografii," in *Literatura i iskusstvo v sisteme kul'tury* (Moscow, 1988), 39–45; idem, "Quellenforschung" (n. 8 above); see also the survey by Macrides, "Historian in the History" (n. 18 above); on further developments in the "narrative" in Byzantine historiography, see as well the brief comments by E. C. Bourbouhakis and I. Nilsson, "Byzantine Narrative: The Form of Storytelling in Byzantium," in James, *Companion* (n. 132 above), 263–74, esp. 265–69; on the transition from late antique to Byzantine historiography, see, among others, Meier, "Prokop, Agathias, die Pest" (n. 167 above).

177 Initial attempts were made by Hunger, *Literatur*, in the form of a handbook, though without the thematic and methodological concerns that are the basis of this article. Of little benefit for this task is J. O. Rosenqvist, *Die byzantinische Literatur: Vom 6. Jahrhundert bis zum Fall Konstantinopels 1453*, trans. J. O. Rosenqvist and D. R. Reinsch (Berlin-New York, 2007).

178 See the still relevant essay by C. Mango, *Byzantine Literature as a Distorting Mirror* (Oxford, 1975). Mango's main focus, however, is on different levels of style.

primarily devoted to the transmission of facts, as it had been previously conceived (and as it is commonly conceived today), or did they regard it as a literary genre, as most scholars today presume?¹⁸¹ And most of all, what effect does this have on our perception? If Byzantine historiography belongs to the category of fine literature, what impact does this have on the reliability of the information it transmits? Was there a specific Byzantine concept of truth different from ours, or are we merely dealing with technical difficulties hindering us from recognizing and distinguishing the—undeniable—idiosyncrasies of Byzantine historiography?¹⁸²

Let us again emphasize that it would be hubristic to presume that all these issues could be conclusively settled here. It would be an accomplishment if the aspects examined here should prove fruitful toward stimulating further discussion, and if these reflections should facilitate a better understanding of the methodology of Byzantine writers of history. The examples presented establish beyond doubt that Byzantines placed much greater value in the entertainment factor, if one may call it that, than we do today. In this regard, all Byzantine historical works remind us to a certain extent of the “scandal sheets” of our own time: the focus of interest is primarily upon the leading people of society—members of the imperial court, in particular—then outstanding events of all kinds—usually disasters, social scandals, and human weaknesses, in general—that are related and commented on with gusto and verve. This is not, of course, a specifically Byzantine method, but was popular in antiquity as well. One need only recall authors like Herodotos or Plutarch, who were well known in Byzantium and highly esteemed models. Clearly, the

more literary aspect of mimesis must be taken into consideration.¹⁸³

With regard to the entertainment factor, Byzantine historiography exhibits a unique quality diametrically opposed to today’s conventions.¹⁸⁴ It was not sufficient for Byzantine authors to attribute specific characteristics or weaknesses to a particular person; preferably, the character of that person should also be illustrated by specific acts or statements. Moreover, it was of no apparent significance whether or not these acts or statements were factual. Indeed, one gets the impression that the exact opposite was the case: the more exaggerated the characterization, the better the effect. A review of the examples discussed above, which could easily be multiplied, reveals that the majority cannot have been factual. It is just as absurd for a logothete to swim across a river to devour an entire bean field on the other side as it is for an extremely wealthy former tax officer to have gifts of fish returned to the market to be resold, which he then again receives as gifts, not just once but repeatedly. That Niketas Choniates uses these examples anyway indicates that he was quite aware that his audience understood them to be illustrations. Their factuality was irrelevant; only their succinctness, which was achieved by this exaggeration to absurdity, mattered.¹⁸⁵ So too, Anna Komnene’s characterization of the Norman Bohemond and that of Michael III in Theophanes continuatus.

Likewise, sayings and bon mots could be used to characterize a person, as shown above, but could also serve to entertain the audience, as is evident in the collection of sayings in pseudo-Michael Psellos’s *Historia syntomos*, which contains sayings that are in no way

181 We shall refrain from mentioning all or even some of the authors who deal with this issue. The *communis opinio* in scholarship is that (Byzantine) historiography is a form of literature. One main focus of the dispute is the proportion of literature to “scientific” history contained in the Byzantine historical works; for a brief introduction with basic literature, see I. Nilsson, “Discovering Literariness in the Past: Literature vs. History in the *Synopsis Chronike* of Konstantinos Manasses,” in *L’écriture de la mémoire* (n. 10 above), 15–31. It must also be noted that Byzantine studies is only now addressing an issue that has long been under discussion in scholarship on classical sources; see, for example, the articles frequently cited by Moles, “Truth and Untruth,” and Wiseman, “Lying Historians” (both n. 7 above).

182 See the useful summary of the past, primarily French discussion by Théologitis, “*La Forza del Destino*” (n. 20 above), 181–96.

183 On Herodotos, see Moles, “Truth and Untruth,” passim; see, as well, H. Hunger, “The Classical Tradition in Byzantine Literature: The Importance of Rhetoric,” in Mullett and Scott, *Byzantium and the Classical Tradition*, 35–47; on mimesis in Byzantine literature in general, see H. Hunger, “On the Imitation (ΜΙΜΗΣΙΣ) of Antiquity in Byzantine Literature,” *DOP* 23–24 (1969–70): 15–38; see, most recently, the brief summary in Hinterberger, “Envy” (n. 129 above), 187–203, esp. 187 with n. 1.

184 It would be worth investigating if corresponding features are found in classical or coeval medieval “Latin” historiography. That cannot be undertaken here, but must be referred to the specialists.

185 The ultimate example is the portrayal of Andronikos I Komnenos, which was not examined here because it is so well known; see, most recently, M. Grünbart, “Die Macht des Historiographen—Andronikos (I.) Komnenos und sein Bild,” *ZbFilozFak* 48 (2011): 75–85.

to be regarded as factual or even useful, but are solely intended to amuse the readership. Which of the two functions—characterization or amusement—plays the greater role, or how they may have been combined, can be determined only for each case individually.

We may, then, conclude that these episodes, despite their extreme farcical exaggeration and lack of reality, were not deliberately composed falsehoods, but were—for both the authors and their audiences—“truthful” in an exalted sense, because they provided a more accurate portrayal of character than could be conveyed by a mere string of adjectives and a list of activities.¹⁸⁶ Precisely because readers were aware that the specific incident was not factual, they could accept the author’s account as accurate and therefore “truthful.” Thus we may exclude the argument that descriptions and assertions had to contain at least a kernel of truth—an argument that claims that the incident in question was still recent enough at the time of composition for readers to remember it and judge the factuality of the account from their own experience. That was precisely not the case in these instances! This relation to the “truth” of the past was by no means new, nor exclusively Byzantine, but has been already prefigured in classical historiography.¹⁸⁷

The potential consequences of this observation are enormous, since the literary technique of characterizing a person by his deeds—be they invented or overstated—was not restricted to this category alone, but can be easily detected in numerous other categories as well.

When we recall Michael Psellos’s portrayal of Constantine VIII, discussed in the category “deliberate tendentious modification,” it is evident that for Psellos the issue of factuality was entirely irrelevant; quite the contrary: he could employ rhetorical elements—antithetical opposition of mutually exclusive

characteristics—without hesitation, because he could trust that his audience was aware that veracity was not the issue, but rather the illustration, with as many convincing examples as possible, of Constantine VIII’s incompetence.

It is nearly impossible to define a line of demarcation between reality and fiction, because the opportunities for “characterization by deeds” are virtually inexhaustible. Thus the fall of Syracuse in 878 and of Taormina in 903 could very well have been caused by the relief fleet’s delayed departure from Constantinople, and we would perhaps not voice any doubts, were it not for the duplication of the narrative. Viewed from the perspective of characterization, however, it may well have served to accuse Basil I and Leo VI of neglecting the empire to satisfy their own private needs. In principle, of course, building churches was a good deed, but here it was implied that the emperors’ ulterior motive was to atone for their sins, while the welfare of the empire was secondary to them. A number of similar examples of this type of characterization were presented and discussed above, so we may forgo further elucidations at this point.

The historical writer was quite free to modify at whim such episodes with regard to date or time, as in the example from Niketas Choniates above (“The Supernatural”) of Manuel I Komnenos who, in response to a prophecy of an imminent disaster had his palace secured, the windows walled up, and shelters prepared. As was shown, this incident may be attributable—if at all—to Isaac II Angelos. But Niketas transposes the entire episode many years forward to the end of Manuel’s reign, to underscore the emperor’s superstition and his dependence on lying pseudo-prophets more vividly than he would otherwise have been able. This incident was the culmination of an entire series of examples of this kind.

These characterizations—that is, these indirect commentaries—are not confined to deeds alone. As shown above in the section “Bon Mots,” Empress Theodora was characterized by her speech, culminating in the bon mot that royalty makes the noblest shroud. Procopius, with this saying, illustrates that Theodora—in contrast to her husband Justinian I, who is portrayed as a weakling—was a fighter, who did not give up in the most difficult situations. It is therefore quite possible that this speech was never given. The argument that it must have at least a historically accurate core because

186 There were these as well, of course, but they alone were insufficient.

187 See Moles, “Truth and Untruth,” 120: “No serious ancient historian was so tied to specific factual truth that he would not sometimes help general truths along by manipulating, even inventing, ‘facts.’” Wiseman, “Lying Historians,” 146, goes even further when he remarks: “With *evidentia*, there was no need for argument: you could simply *see* the thing was true. And you achieved that end by making explicit ‘all the circumstances which it is reasonable to imagine must have occurred.’ That is, the invention of circumstantial detail was a way to reach the truth.”

there were so many witnesses who would have remembered it is no longer tenable,¹⁸⁸ since Procopius would, in any case, have been free to characterize Theodora by a deed analogous in content to this speech.

If the comment on a person is meant to be succinct, regardless of its facticity, then additional dramatization and overstatement (see “Sensationalism and Overdramatization” above) are only a small step away. One can, in any case, rule out the possibility that there were standard rules regulating up to which point a description had to be factual, and from when on it could be fictitious or contain fictitious elements. What was permissible with regard to persons could be equally applied to situations, by which individuals could again be indirectly characterized, negatively or positively. When Anna Komnene condenses the advancement of the Crusaders on Constantinople, which actually took six months, to a few weeks, she is dramatizing the overall situation, while praising all the more her father Alexios I, who in her opinion proved to be an outstanding ruler in this threatening situation. Her description of Bohemond’s return to the West in 1104 also contains all the elements of overstatement, characterizing Bohemond as a hero of evil, whose only match on the Byzantine side is Emperor Alexios himself—yet again transforming the scene to an indirect praise of Alexios.

Larger groups or entire ethnicities could also be characterized by exaggeration. Niketas Choniates in his account of the Third Crusade tells of a gigantic German knight, who had lost contact with his unit and was walking alone next to his horse in full armor behind the army. More than fifty mounted Turks attacked him, shooting arrows at him, which did not disturb him in the least. Finally one Turk attacked him directly. The knight drew his sword and first struck at the horse’s forelegs, causing the horse to fall. He thereupon struck the Turk, splitting him with one blow of his sword into two halves from head to hips, severing the saddle as well and injuring the horse.¹⁸⁹ This scene is, of course, entirely unrealistic. Even with a two-handed sword, it

is quite impossible for anyone, however mighty, to split his opponent in two with a single blow. This episode is, however, greatly effective in its characterization of the tremendous strength of the Latins in general, and the Germans in particular, replete with mythical echoes engendered by Niketas’s diction. In this context, the question of reality was entirely irrelevant.¹⁹⁰

Epic elements, which are almost always linked to a specific person, are likewise opportunities for exaggeration. Occasionally they may also be applied to a specific battle, for example, the tournament organized by Manuel I in 1159 at Antioch. By including quotations from Homer and references to the ancient gods and heroes, its significance is amplified to such an extent that one is led to imagine the emperor’s great victory on the battlefield, whereas in the greater context of the entire military campaign the episode is comparatively negligible.

What conclusions may we draw about the general conception and design of the chroniclers’ works from the freedom they enjoyed in characterizing their protagonists? And was this freedom restricted to the techniques we have described? That would be unlikely, since in this age there were no set regulations for a historical work, but instead, at most, general expectations and unwritten rules deriving from tradition, which were, however, neither unalterable nor obligatory. Assuming that every author wrote for an audience, however large or small, one may then presume—at least, when successful—a certain consensus between author and readership that will influence the expectations of a historiographical work. In Byzantium these expectations were most certainly quite different from ours, as is most evident in the last two categories analyzed above, which have nothing in common with our concept of historical writing, but were intended primarily to entertain the reader, belonging therefore to the category of “fine literature,” in the broadest sense.

188 For example, H.-G. Beck, *Kaiserin Theodora und Prokop: Der Historiker und sein Opfer* (Munich-Zurich, 1986), 39; see the discussion in Meier, “Theodora-Rede,” 92–93 with n. 13. Meier is generally skeptical about the historicity of the speech.

189 Niketas Choniates, *History* 414.85–415.15; on this passage in another context cf. J. Davis, “Anna Komnene and Niketas Choniates ‘Translated’: The Fourteenth-Century Byzantine Metaphrases,” in Macrides, *History as Literature*, 55–70, esp. 60–61.

190 Proof of how convincing it actually was is that it even made its way into German poetry in “Als Kaiser Rotbart lobesam” by Ludwig Uhland, who adopts the account by the Byzantine chronicler almost verbatim, merely transposing it into verse, referring to it as “Schwabenstreiche” (“Swabian stunts”). A similar example is the reception of a German delegation at the imperial court in 1196 (Niketas Choniates, *History* 477–78), which has as its central theme, as Kaldellis, “Paradox” (n. 18 above), 90–91, correctly observes, the contrast between Germans and Byzantines, illustrated by the acts and speeches given on this occasion.

This intention to entertain is most evident in the use of “timeless” material, which served primarily to make more engaging descriptions that were otherwise deemed too dry. This method could also be categorized as “characterization by deeds.”¹⁹¹ The tale analyzed above, in which a murderer is exposed by the victim’s dog and receives his just punishment, does not belong in a “serious” historical work. Also, the change of the source’s—in this case, George the Monk’s—dating by John Kedrenos demonstrates that the Byzantines regarded these episodes as nonspecific and as usable at any point in a narrative. Their only purpose, aside from rendering the factual account more appealing, was to demonstrate that the bad guy truly is punished in the end. In this respect, it may have served a didactic function as well. At the same time, it had an entertainment value that must not be underestimated. The great popularity of George the Monk’s chronicle is an indication of the importance audiences attached to this entertainment factor in historical works.

This “need to be entertained,” if one may call it that, is most evident in one feature typical of all Byzantine literature, not just historical writing. In Byzantium, the ability to imitate earlier works was held in high regard, in particular those of classical antiquity, but also later authors, as well as biblical texts and their commentators. Often this ability was considered more important than a factual account of the events portrayed.¹⁹² At times, we tend to accept this mimesis as normal for Byzantine literature, without grasping the larger consequences. Let us examine, for example, the speech Niketas has the French king Louis VII give to his soldiers during the Second Crusade just before a battle against the Seljuqs in Asia Minor.¹⁹³ It is a speech typically delivered on such occasions and frequently encountered. Scholarship generally takes little notice of speeches of this kind, since it is

assumed that the author was free to attribute his own thoughts to the speaker, a “concession” accorded to Byzantine historiographers.¹⁹⁴ The consequence of this is, however, the realization that speeches of this kind, if they were ever delivered, which is quite doubtful, had nothing at all to do with reality. In this specific case, Niketas Choniates attributes to the French king a classical speech that a Byzantine commander in his opinion would have given, or at least should have given,¹⁹⁵ but that would have, in fact, been quite inconceivable for a “barbarian Frank.” It is larded with quotations from the Old and New Testaments and the Epistles. While one might presume a certain familiarity with these texts on the part of the king, or his advisors, the speech also contains anonymous quotations from Isocrates, Theocritus, and even Procopius. No one at the French court would have been familiar with these authors. The ultimate consequence of this method is that Niketas Choniates’ Byzantine readership received an entirely false impression of the king’s education—and of his entire personality. Even assuming that the readers were aware of this, it meant that they were not properly informed about this foreign ruler, at least not according to our own conception of historical writing.¹⁹⁶

This literary technique was not confined to exceptions like direct speech, but was also employed in

191 Recall, for example, Philentolos’s mention of Patriarch Germanos in the example above (“‘Timeless’ Episodes”), in which the patriarch merely serves as a point of reference for time and place, playing no other role in the narrative.

192 See the studies cited above in n. 183.

193 Niketas Choniates, *History* 68.74–70.42; see Efthymiadis, *Niketas Choniates*, 41 (n. 63 above), who attributes the speech, following Niketas’s account, to Conrad III. This error, however, is of practically no significance, since the entire speech was probably invented by Niketas. Louis VII and the French army play effectively no role in Niketas’s narration.

194 This freedom in the treatment of speeches is not specifically Byzantine, but is already encountered in Thucydides; see for example Moles, “Truth and Untruth,” 104–5: “He [Thucydides] regards the ideal to be accurate reportage of speeches, as of deeds. But this is impracticable, so his speeches will be an amalgam of a solid factual core and an inevitably subjective reconstruction of ‘what was necessary,’ even if they did not say it. This may, and often does, produce material that is in one sense historically implausible . . . yet things which are, on another level, historically true, in that they reflect the real logic of their position.”

195 Whereby the situation, as such, is contrafactual. Imagine a commander holding a lengthy speech on an open field before several thousand cavalrymen and infantrymen. How would this have been possible in an age without any technical means to amplify a human voice? On the other hand, descriptions of such fictive speeches may also be found in classical historiography, so authors like Niketas Choniates could not only follow a literary tradition, but at the same time find the ideal opportunity to voice their own commentary through the mouth of their protagonist.

196 The allusions to antiquity are not confined to the king’s speech alone, as Niketas also compares the battle and its outcome to the defeat of the Cimbri against the Romans at Marseille, as transmitted by Diodorus; see Simpson, “Workshop,” 266–67.

“factual” descriptions, as in the siege of Didymoteichon by the Bulgarians or in the example of the tournament (see “Anonymous Quotations” above). While the references to ancient heroes and gods in the latter case makes conspicuous its literary transformation of the actual events, the quotations in the French king’s speech—in particular, in the description of the siege of Didymoteichon—are more obscure and therefore comprehensible only to those readers with sufficient education. At the same time, such readers must have been aware that the actual events had been filtered and modified by the author. Apparently, this posed no difficulties. Quite the contrary, they appreciated this approach and evidently considered it entirely normal, provided, of course, that they recognized the inset quotations and modifications for what they were. We can presume that it was not Niketas Choniates’ intention to reach a large audience, but that he was writing to a small group of elite intellectuals that comprehended and appreciated his allusions.¹⁹⁷

We can conclude that Byzantium had a conception of historical writing wholly different from our own. If it was standard authorial practice to alter accounts so as to present a more colorful portrait of people and their characters, to shift events, deeds, speeches, and sayings both in time and space, and to deploy anonymous quotations in order for an author to demonstrate his own erudition and to satisfy that of his listeners and readers, then Byzantine historical writing can no longer be regarded as comparable to today’s.

Byzantine historiography was by no means an “imperfect” predecessor, as it were, of modern historical writing, but quite evidently a separate branch of literature with its own, albeit not definitively codified, expectations and rules. When Warren Treadgold, quoted earlier, writes, “But few Byzantine historians would have written something they believed false simply in order to produce an artful literary composition, as authors of fiction routinely do,”¹⁹⁸ this is only accurate in a very limited way—if at all. Byzantine historiographers defined the categories of “true” and “false” quite differently from the way that we define

them today. If we consider an account of an individual episode to be entirely unrealistic, because it is impossible for it to have happened as narrated, it does not render this account “false” from the viewpoint of the Byzantines. For author and audience, this was an irrelevant distinction. When the intended effect of such an account was achieved, then it was “true” on a higher level. A Byzantine author felt quite justified in composing his narrative accordingly and, should the case require, even in modifying his transcribed sources to adapt them to his own design.¹⁹⁹

In addition, there were the respective authors’ efforts to accommodate the expectations of their audiences, and perhaps even to form them to a certain extent, although such audiences did vary. Historians like Michael Psellos, Nikephoros Bryennios, Anna Komnene, or Niketas Choniates wrote for a very small circle of highly educated literary people, who understood and shared their literary ambitions. Authors like Theophanes, George the Monk, or the Logothete chronicler, on the other hand, although they also intend to inform and entertain their audiences, work at a decidedly lower literary level. Between these two extremes there were, of course, several other gradations that must be analyzed and evaluated individually. Nevertheless, authors like Niketas Choniates and George the Monk, for example, no matter how different in style, writing level, and target audiences, exhibit a greater similarity in their fundamental conception of the task of historical writing than one would assume from a superficial reading of their works.

To a certain extent, one could compare many Byzantine works of historical writing with Impressionist painting, even better with the pointillist style: the overall impression of the picture is the decisive criterion, while the individual significance of the single dot of color is primarily determined by its effect within the picture as a whole. In itself, it has no—or very little—significance.

From the reflections presented here one could perhaps draw the conclusion that all Byzantine historiographical works were products of pure fantasy that had nothing to do with reality. That would be highly exaggerated. The majority of the portrayals of Byzantine historical writers were, in all probability, accurate and

197 Mango, *Byzantine Literature as a Distorting Mirror* (n. 178 above), 4–5, estimates that this group comprised a maximum of 300 people; see, most recently, Croke, “Uncovering Byzantium’s Historiographical Audience” (n. 173 above).

198 Treadgold, “Commentary” (n. 8 above), 58.

199 Kaldellis, “Paradox,” using Niketas Choniates as an example, is an excellent analysis of this type of shaping.

depict events more or less correctly.²⁰⁰ The actual problem is that in individual cases we are often unable—or only with great difficulty—to discern whether or not information pertaining to a specific person or an individual event is accurate, or if it was somehow modified, or if it was even partly or entirely invented by an author or his source. This difficulty is especially acute

200 Correct in the sense that the entertainment factor did not influence the text, or only to a small degree. That does not rule out deliberate tendentious modifications, of course—which are not, however, typically Byzantine, but inherent in historical writing from its beginnings to this very day.

for those readers who are not familiar with the literary style of Byzantine authors. In our opinion, it is urgently necessary to analyze the works of Byzantine historical writers much more intensely than has been done to date. Only then will we be in a position to fully understand and evaluate the idiosyncrasies of Byzantine historiography—a task that is sure to keep us occupied for many years to come.

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